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AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

SINCE 1996

BLOODLINES 2

CAN A NEW DEVELOPER RE-WRITE THE WRONGS OF THE ORIGINAL GAME?

WE FIND OUT!

VERMINTIDE II: WINDS OF MAGIC

WILL IT BLOW ILL FOR THE FRANCHISE?

DIVINITY: FALLEN HEROES

THE HIT RPG TAKES AN IMPRESSIVE TACTICAL TURN

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FANGS FOR EVERYTHING

I somehow managed to miss the first iteration of Bloodlines back in the day, which is kinda odd – I'm a mad-keen fan of the original tabletop game. I've played in ongoing campaigns, one-off LARPs, and am currently running an intense little story set during a massive vampire war in modern Los Angeles.

I gave it a good shot a couple of years ago, and I really did appreciate a lot of what the game was doing – but there was no denying the game was as much a mess as I'd ever heard about, and to be honest... I find it hard going back to games that old. They just don't look good, and I'm pretty shallow gamer, really. For all the great writing and plotting of Bloodlines, I just can't get past how ordinary it looks.

So as far as Bloodlines 2 is concerned, it's getting a HUGE hell yes from me. And after reading our preview this issue, my hype may be hitting dangerous levels...

We hope it excites you too!

David Hollingworth
Editor

"Unpopular opinion... I actually kinda like Anthem!"

PC PowerPlay

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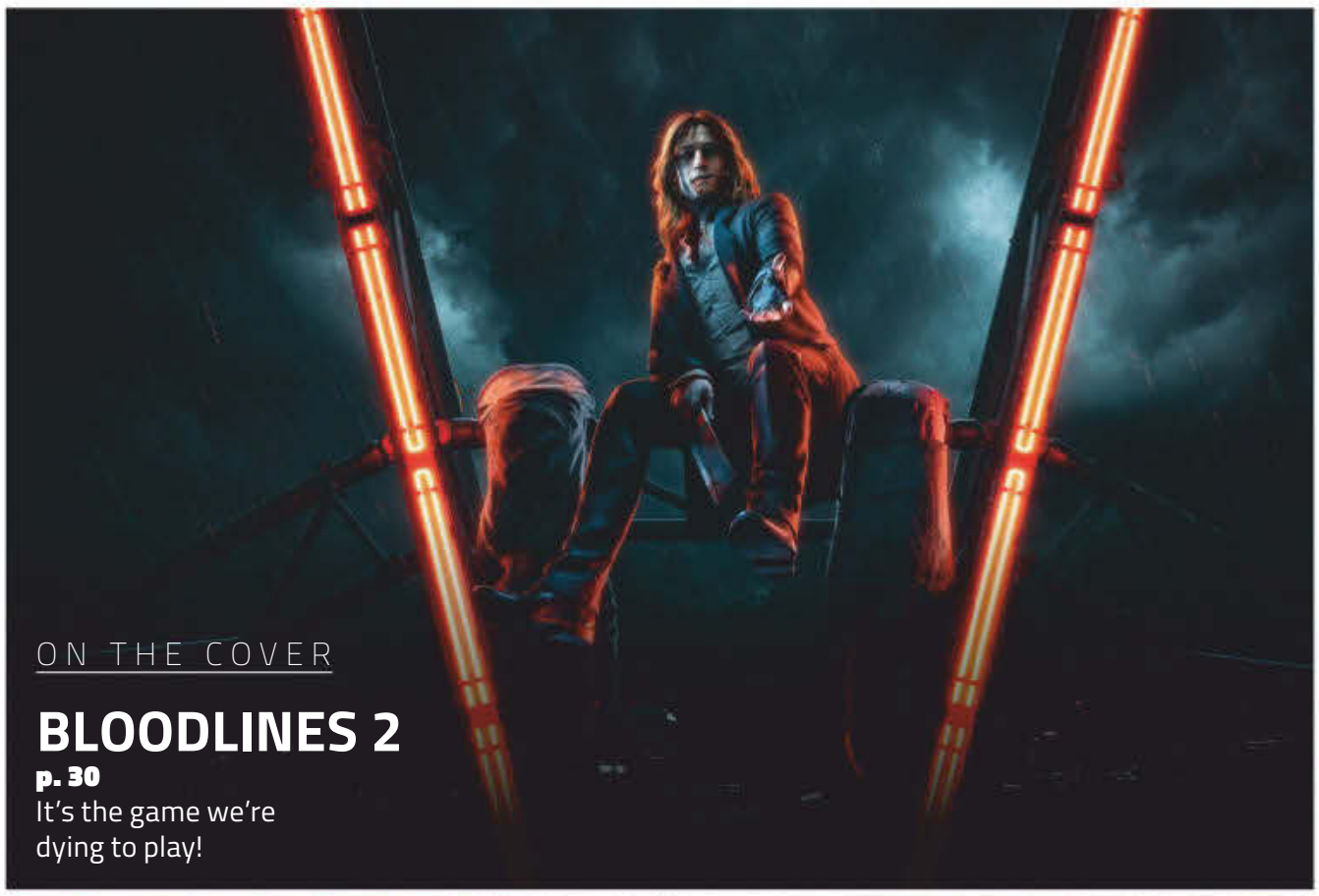

ON THE COVER

BLOODLINES 2

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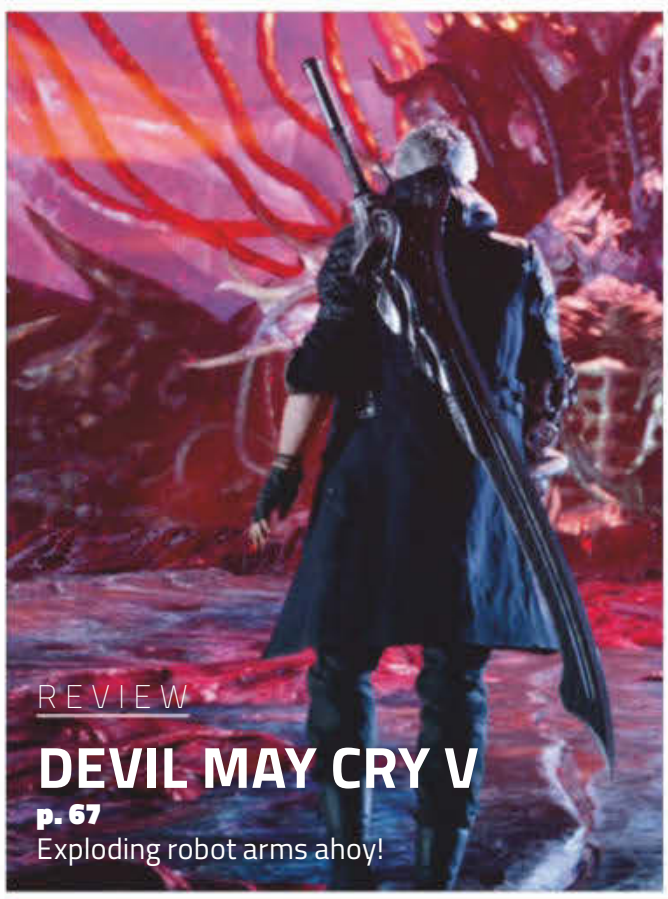
It's the game we're dying to play!



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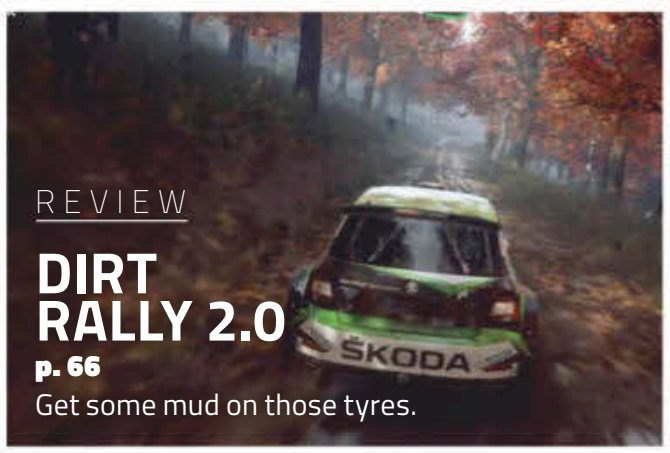
Exploding robot arms ahoy!



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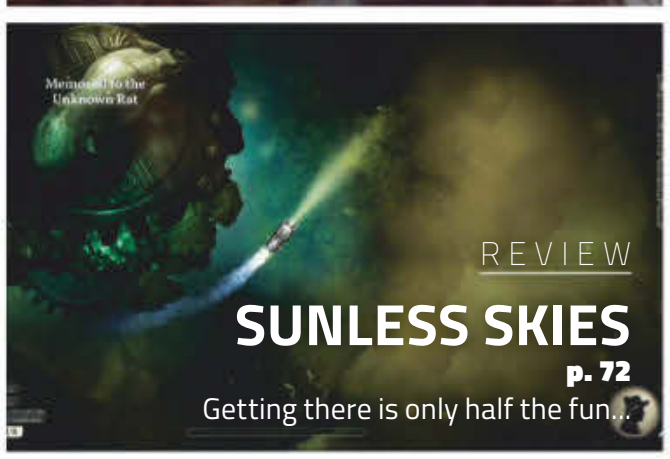

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Nvidia wants to show you the light with its new 20-series cards.

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THE DIVISION 2

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Washington, Washing-TON...

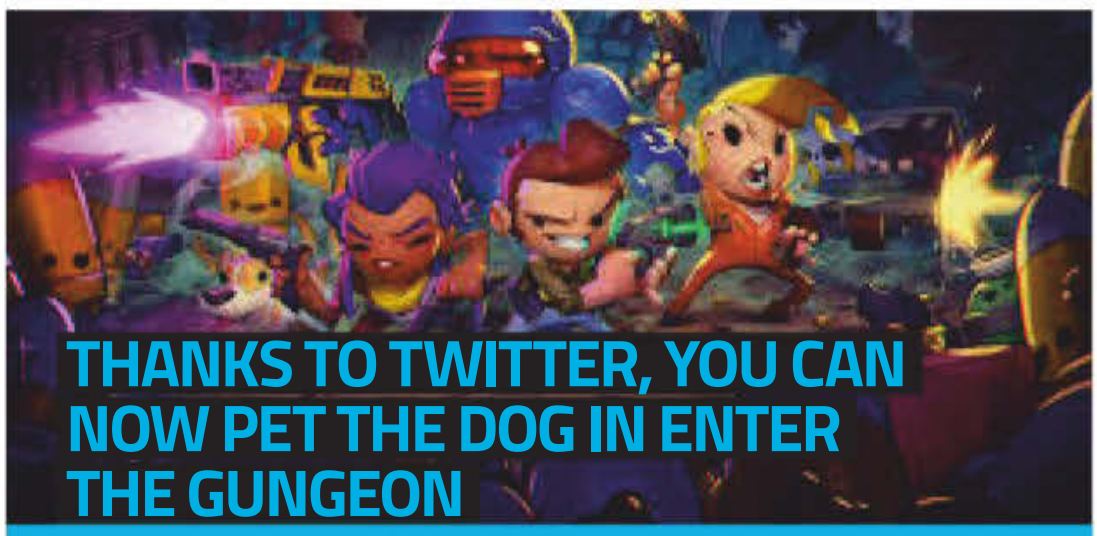
RUMORS ABOUT THE NEXT DRAGON AGE SPARK FEARS IT'LL BE ANOTHER ANTHEM

A new report digs into how the game has changed from its original vision to a 'live' service.

A new report from Kotaku on the history and current status of the next Dragon Age game reveals old plans for an ambitious and intriguing RPG, code-named Joplin, that would have prioritised "choice and consequence," rather than simplistic fetch quests, in a game world smaller than DA:I, but deeper and more reactive. Alas, that vision of the game allegedly fell victim to the ol' double-whammy of Mass Effect: Andromeda and Anthem.

In its place, according to the report, is a rebooted game intended to be a better fit with Electronic Arts' mandate to develop "games as a service," which evolve — and can be monetised — for years after their initial release. Instead of using the tools and pipelines established for Dragon Age: Inquisition as was originally planned, the rebooted game — code-named Morrison — will be built on Anthem's codebase, and will feature a "live service component, built for long-term gameplay and revenue".

It's not clear how much of the original idea will be inherited by the new game, but the report says that Mike Laidlaw, creative director on the Dragon Age series, left BioWare shortly after the reboot. BioWare general manager Casey Hudson said in 2018 that the game will be "story and character focused," however, and that describing it as "live" means "designing a game for continued storytelling after the main story."



THANKS TO TWITTER, YOU CAN NOW PET THE DOG IN ENTER THE GUNGEON

Who's a good boy?

Early in March, when the twitter account Can You Pet the Dog had just gotten going, the account highlighted Enter the Gungeon, noting sadly, "You cannot pet the dog in Enter the Gungeon." New Blood Interactive CEO Dave Oshry noticed the tweet, responding with a weeping emoticon and tagging Dave Crooks, the designer behind Enter the Gungeon.

"Hold my beer," Crooks replied.

Fast forward to this past Friday when Dodge Roll Games released its final update for Gungeon, titled A Farewell to Arms. It adds a bunch of wacky new weapons and items, new secret floors and bosses, and new characters.

And you can now pet the dog.

CIVILIZATION 6 ART DIRECTOR RELEASES A MOD THAT MAKES IT LOOK LIKE CIVILIZATION 5

Everything old is new again.

Have you ever played Civilization 6 and thought to yourself, this is great, but I really wish it looked a little... older? If the answer to that question is yes for some reason, Civ 6 art director Brian Busatti has come up with just the thing: A Civ 5 "Environment Skin" mod that's now available through the Steam Workshop.

The mod "changes the visuals of the game to better match the colors and tones" of Civ 5, with changes to texture details, a more neutral color palette for buildings and units, and other changes.

"I was challenged by the team to create an expansive mod using Mod Buddy, and this was the end result," Busatti wrote. "It's an example of how much you can change the visuals and I hope it provides inspiration to try your own modifications."

The mod is compatible with all releases of Civilization 6, including the recent Gathering Storm, and will not cause any problems with saved games.

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PRESTIGE SERIES

THIS RTX 2080 TI HAS AN OLED DISPLAY AND AIO LIQUID COOLER, COSTS $1,900

You'll need three 8-pin PCIe power connectors to run this thing.

For anyone who can afford it, the GeForce RTX 2080 Ti is the best graphics card for gaming, offering comparable performance to a Titan RTX for around half the price. That depends on the specific model, though. Case in point, EVGA launched its GeForce RTX 2080 Ti Kingpin Gaming card last month, a premium GPU with a price tag to match — US$1,899.99, if you're an EVGA Associates member.

If you're not an Associates member, you can't buy it. The Associates program is a new thing that incentivizes EVGA customers to peddle its products by sharing a unique code. The buyer who uses the code gets a discount on most items, and the "Associate" gets a kickback in the form of EVGA bucks (in-store currency).

Apparently one of the perks is gaining exclusive access to a graphics card that costs US$1,899.99. It's a hefty markup over a regular or Founders Edition RTX 2080 Ti for sure, though in fairness, there is quite a bit that separates the Kingpin model from other cards.

This is a card that is designed for overclocking. It has a 16+3 phase VRM design with integrated "Smart Power Stages, each capable of supplying up to 60 amperes of continuous current." That basically means it was built to remain stable while being pushed.

Three 8-pin PCIe power connectors supply the necessary current. It also has three BIOSes — one each for Normal, OC, and Extreme LN2 modes. Regardless of which mode you're running in, you can keep tabs on temps and vitals through an array of a dozen sensors.

Out of the box, the Kingpin card boosts to 1,770MHz. That's the same as a Titan RTX. Nvidia's RTX 2080 Ti Founders Edition boosts to 1,635MHz, while the reference blueprint calls for a 1,545MHz.

Dang.

NVIDIA'S UPCOMING GEFORCE GTX 1650 MIGHT NOT REQUIRE A POWER CABLE

Leaked renders of a Zotac GeForce GTX 1650 surface.

There are plenty of rumors pointing to Nvidia releasing a GeForce GTX 1650 graphics card in the near future, and just last week, we assembled them into a tidy article covering price, specs, release date, and everything we know about the GTX 1650, including the expected power requirements. Since then, a batch of press renders have found their way to the web, and it looks like the GTX 1650 might not require a dedicated power cable from your PSU, just as we surmised.

The folks at Videocardz got their mitts on a batch of what look to be official press renders of a Zotac model. According to the box art, the GTX 1650 will indeed ship with 4GB of GDDR5 memory, as we had been hearing.

What's interesting though is what's not seen. The renders show the card from multiple angles, and none of them reveal a PCIe power connector on the card. If that is indeed the case, then the 75W provided from a PCIe x16 slot will be sufficient to power the card.

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https://au.aoc.com/

Announcing the 2019 Australian PC Awards winners

Recognising and rewarding the very best in PC gear.

THE WINNERS

BEST BUDGET MOTHERBOARD OF 2018

FINALISTS:
Asrock B360M-Pro4, Asus ROG Strix B450-F Gaming, Gigabyte B360 Aorus Gaming 3 WiFi, Gigabyte B450 Aorus Pro, MSI B360 Gaming Pro Carbon

WINNER:
ASUS ROG STRIX B450-F GAMING

BEST PREMIUM MOTHERBOARD OF 2018

FINALISTS:
Asrock X470 Taichi, Asus Prime X299 Deluxe II, Asus ROG Maximus XI Formula, Gigabyte Z390 Aorus Master, MSI MEG X399 Creation, MSI MEG Z390 Ace

WINNER:
ASUS ROG MAXIMUS XI FORMULA

BEST MOTHERBOARD COMPANY OF 2018

FINALISTS:
Asrock, Asus, Gigabyte Aorus, MSI

WINNER:
ASUS

BEST BUDGET GRAPHICS CARD OF 2018

FINALISTS:
Asus Expedition Radeon RX570 eSports, Asus GeForce GTX 1050 Ti Cerberus OC 4GB, Gigabyte GeForce GTX 1050 OC 3G, Gigabyte GeForce GTX 1060 Windforce OC D5X, MSI Radeon RX 580 Armour MK2 8G OC

WINNER: GIGABYTE GEFORCE GTX 1060 WINDFORCE OC D5X

BEST PERFORMANCE VIDEO CARD OF 2018

FINALISTS:
Asus Dual GeForce RTX 2070 OC 8GB, Asus ROG Strix RTX 2080 Ti O11G Gaming, Gigabyte Aorus GeForce RTX 2080 Ti Extreme 11GB, MSI GeForce RTX 2070 Ventus 8GB, MSI GeForce RTX 2080 Ti Gaming X Trio 11GB

WINNER:
ASUS ROG STRIX RTX 2080TI O11G GAMING

BEST GPU COMPANY OF 2018

FINALISTS:
AMD, Nvidia

WINNER:
NVIDIA

BEST VALUE CPU OF 2018

FINALISTS:
AMD Ryzen 5 2600, AMD Ryzen 5 2400G APU, Intel Core i3-8300, Intel Core i5-8500

WINNER:
INTEL CORE I5-8500

HIGHLY COMMENDED: AMD RYZEN 5 2600

BEST PERFORMANCE CPU OF 2018

FINALISTS:
Intel Core i7-8700K, Intel Core i9-9900K, AMD Ryzen Threadripper 2950X, AMD Ryzen 7 2700X

WINNER:
INTEL CORE I9-9900K

It began with an intensive shortlisting process, creating finalists for the best-of-the-best gear that was released through 2018. Then, we opened up the voting for the Awards to the Australian public — you — the real experts with the most valued opinions. You had your say, and at the end of the voting period the winners across all the important PC categories rose to the top, and now it's finally time to reveal the champions.

On a glorious March night in Sydney, the big moment came and throughout the night the winners were announced and trophies claimed. And, there was much joy as the hard work and innovation of the winners was rewarded with an Australian PC Award, as voted by you. Every company that was a finalist has every right to feel proud, too. It's a tough industry with fierce competition that endlessly creates better and better products, so to every company that was represented we say congratulations – whether you took a trophy home or not.

Award highlights included Corsair taking home the highly-coveted Gold Award for Best Company, winning out over many other big-name PC brands and demonstrating just how well-respected the memory, case, PC and peripherals maker is in the Australian PC scene.

BEST CPU COMPANY OF 2018
FINALISTS:
AMD, Intel

WINNER: INTEL

BEST SATA SSD OF 2018
FINALISTS:
HyperX Fury RGB SSD, Samsung 860 Evo, Samsung 860 Pro, Seagate Barracuda SSD

WINNER: SAMSUNG 860 PRO

BEST NVME SSD OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Crucial P1, Intel Optane 800P, Intel SSD 660P, Samsung 970 Evo, Samsung 970 Pro, WD Black NVMe SSD

WINNER: SAMSUNG 970 PRO

BEST HARD DRIVE COMPANY OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Seagate, Toshiba, WD

WINNER: SEAGATE

BEST HOME NAS OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Asustor AS3202, Asustor AS3204T, Asustor AS4004T, QNAP HS-453DX, QNAP TS-251B, Synology DiskStation DS218+

WINNER: SYNOLOGY DISKSTATION DS218+

BEST SOHO NAS OF 2018
FINALISTS:
QNAP TS-453Be, QNAP TVS-951X, Synology DiskStation DS1618+, Synology DiskStation DS1819+

WINNER: SYNOLOGY DISKSTATION DS 1819+

BEST VALUE LAPTOP OR 2-IN-1 OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Acer Spin 5, Asus VivoBook Pro 17, HP 250 G6, Huawei Matebook X Pro, Kogan Atlas C300

WINNER: ASUS VIVOBOOK PRO 17

BEST PREMIUM LAPTOP OR 2-IN-1 OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Apple MacBook Pro 15, Asus ZenBook Pro 15, Dell XPS 13, Microsoft Surface Laptop 2, Microsoft Surface Pro 6, Razer Blade Stealth

WINNER: RAZER BLADE STEALTH

And speaking of the local scene, enthusiast-friendly Aussie retailer PC Case Gear managed to take home not one by two awards last night, coming away with the trophies for both the Best Desktop PC Builder and Best Reseller (Online) categories.

AND THE WINNERS ARE...

Corsair and PC Case Gear weren't the only winners, of course, with the likes of Asus, Razer, Samsung, Synology and Logitech also racking up awards of their own.

And remember: you made this happen. But if your favourite thing that you voted for didn't get a gong this year that's OK — because the Australian PC Awards is an annual staple of the PC scene, so this time next year we shall call upon you, the Australian public, to once again vote — because ultimately it's your opinion that matters most.

"You made this happen. But if your favourite thing that you voted for didn't get a gong this year that's OK — because the Australian PC Awards is an annual staple of the PC scene."

THE WINNERS

BEST GAMING LAPTOP OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Acer Helios 300, Aorus X9DT, Asus ROG Zephyrus S GX531GS, Dell XPS 15 2-in-1, Gigabyte Aero 15X, MSI GS65 Stealth Thin, Razer Blade 15

WINNER:
ASUS ROG ZEPHYRUS S GX531GS

BEST DESKTOP PC BUILDER OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Acer, Alienware, Asus, Aus PC Market, Corsair, Dell, HP, Lenovo, MSI, MSY, Mwave, PC Case Gear, PLE, Scorptec, Umart

WINNER:
PC CASE GEAR

BEST MEMORY COMPANY OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Adata, Corsair, Crucial Ballistix, G.Skill, Geil, Kingston, Team T-Force

WINNER: CORSAIR

BEST COOLING PRODUCT OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Cooler Master MasterAir MA410M, Cooler Master MasterLiquid ML240R RGB, Corsair Hydro Series H115i RGB Platinum 280mm, Deepcool Gamer Storm Castle 240 RGB, Thermaltake Pacific M360 Plus, Thermaltake Riing Trio LED RGB Fan

WINNER: CORSAIR HYDRO H115I RGB PLATINUM 280MM

BEST MONITOR OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Acer Predator X27, Acer Predator X34P, AOC AG273QCG, AOC AG322QC4, AOC AG352UCG6, AOC C27G1, Asus ProArt PA27AC, Asus ROG Swift PG27UQ, LG 27UK850-W, Philips 436M6VBPAB, Samsung CJ89, Samsung Thunderbolt 3 Curved QLED, ViewSonic VP3881

WINNER:
ASUS ROG SWIFT PG27UQ

BEST KEYBOARD OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Corsair K70 MK.2, HyperX Alloy Elite RGB, Logitech G613, Razer Huntsman Elite, Thermaltake Tt Premium X1 RGB

WINNER: CORSAIR K70 MK.2

BEST MOUSE OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Corsair Dark Core RGB SE, Logitech G203 Prodigy, Razer Mamba Elite, SteelSeries Sensei 310, Thermaltake Tt eSports Iris Optical RGB

WINNER:
RAZER MAMBA ELITE

HIGHLY COMMENDED:
CORSAIR DARK CORE RGB SE

BEST GAMING HEADPHONES OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Corsair HS70, Logitech G Pro Gaming Headset, Razer Nari Ultimate, SteelSeries Arctis Pro, Thermaltake Tt eSports Shock Pro 7.1 RGB, Turtle Beach Elite Pro Tournament

WINNER: LOGITECH G PRO GAMING HEADSET

BEST PC CASE OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Cooler Master MasterCase SL600M, Corsair Obsidian Series 500D RGB SE, Fractal Design Define S2, Lian-Li O11 Air, NZXT H200i, Phanteks Enthoo Evolv X, Thermaltake View 37 ARGB Edition

WINNER: CORSAIR OBSIDIAN 500D RGB SE

BEST ROUTER OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Asus ROG Rapture GT-AC5300, Google Wifi, Draytek Vigor2762Vac, Linksys Velop (Dual-Band), Netgear Orbi RBK23, Synology MR2200ac, TP-Link Archer C5400X, TP-Link Deco M5

WINNER: ASUS ROG RAPTURE GT-AC5300

BEST ONLINE RESELLER OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Aus PC Market, Centre Com, CPL, Harris Technology, MSY, Mwave, PC Case Gear, PLE, Scorptec, Umart

WINNER: PC CASE GEAR

BEST RETAIL RESELLER OF 2018
FINALISTS:
Adelong Electronics, ARC Computers, Centre Com, Harvey Norman, JB Hi-Fi, JW Computers, Mwave, Officeworks, PLE

WINNER: JB HI-FI

GOLD AWARD BEST COMPANY OF 2018
FINALISTS:
AMD, Asus, Razer, Thermaltake, Synology, Qnap, Samsung, Corsair, AOC, Acer, TP-Link, MSI, Logitech

WINNER: CORSAIR
HIGHLY COMMENDED: ASUS
HIGHLY COMMENDED: AMD

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Chinese Whispers

This is an amazing time for gaming. A glorious new age of FAILURE!

JAMES COTTEE
is still writing after decades in the business, so clearly does not know how to fail.

Today's gaming enthusiasts can warm themselves before a bonfire of inanities, as multinational companies squander tens of millions of dollars crafting AAA duds. Games like Mass Effect Andromeda, Fallout 76, and Anthem. Buggy and incomplete at launch; falling apart at the seams. Breaking under their own weight. When we read about how a major studio head accidentally left a flash drive full of company secrets and fetish porn at a novelty restaurant, we realise that the luminaries of gaming are but mortals just like us. Very human, and very flawed.

The companies they helm wield colossal ad budgets, omniscient market research, and armies of engineers, so you'd think they could just crank out hit after hit, effortlessly. Yet they fail. And over time they don't 'fail better.' They fail worse.

Remember Artifact? It was a digital trading card game that Valve had such high hopes for. Valve – the multi-billion dollar company that controls over half of the market in online game sales. The secretive firm that hires only the very best and brightest, that gave the world Half-Life and Left 4 Dead and Portal. Valve — for decades a name synonymous with quality.

Yet Artifact tanked, utterly. As of this writing there are fewer than 200 players simultaneously online. It was supposed to wipe the floor with Hearthstone. The mandarins at Valve hired the creator of Magic the Gathering, and had the full marketing reach of the Steam Store at their disposal. But Artifact got absolutely everything wrong.

In a genre dominated by free-to-play competitors, they charged a premium price just to access the game. Then you had to pay for booster packs to get some decent cards. Then you had to pay to compete! And via commission chiselling in Steam's marketplace, you had to pay to buy and sell cards with other players. It was pay-to-play, and, arguably, pay-to-win.

The galaxy-brain managers at Valve thought they could make a game exclusively for whales. But they failed to consider the merits of the freemium ecosystem. Gaming whales feed on digital krill; free-to-play cannon fodder who, with their under-powered builds, essentially volunteer to act as NPCs in the power fantasies of high rollers. It's those teeming hoards of free-to-players who keep the servers alive, who stop your game from turning into an Evolve or a Battleborn.

Valve utterly failed to read the market. They failed to give the gamers what they want. In a related development, Valve veteran Chet Faliszek recently pointed out that the unsettling trend of 'review bombing' is an understandable result of consumer frustration. When they feel their concerns aren't being heeded, customers protest the only way they can. Blaming the customers isn't the answer. Communication is vital.

> "The galaxy-brain managers at Valve thought they could make a game exclusively for whales."

Without concrete information to go on, humans do what they always do: they make stuff up. For example: "Epic is part owned by Tencent, Tencent is based in Red China. Ergo, Epic is in the thrall of a potentially hostile foreign power. Concordantly, the new Epic Store must be full of spyware." Without any other info to go on, it sure sounds plausible.

These rumours were so damaging that Epic CEO Tim Sweeney felt compelled to post a huge Twitter thread reassuring his customers that Tencent is but a minority shareholder and that he is still very much in control of his own company. The rumours were so bad that he actually had to come out and say that the Epic Store is NOT funnelling user data to the commies. Bravo, I say. He took the initiative and actually communicated with his customers.

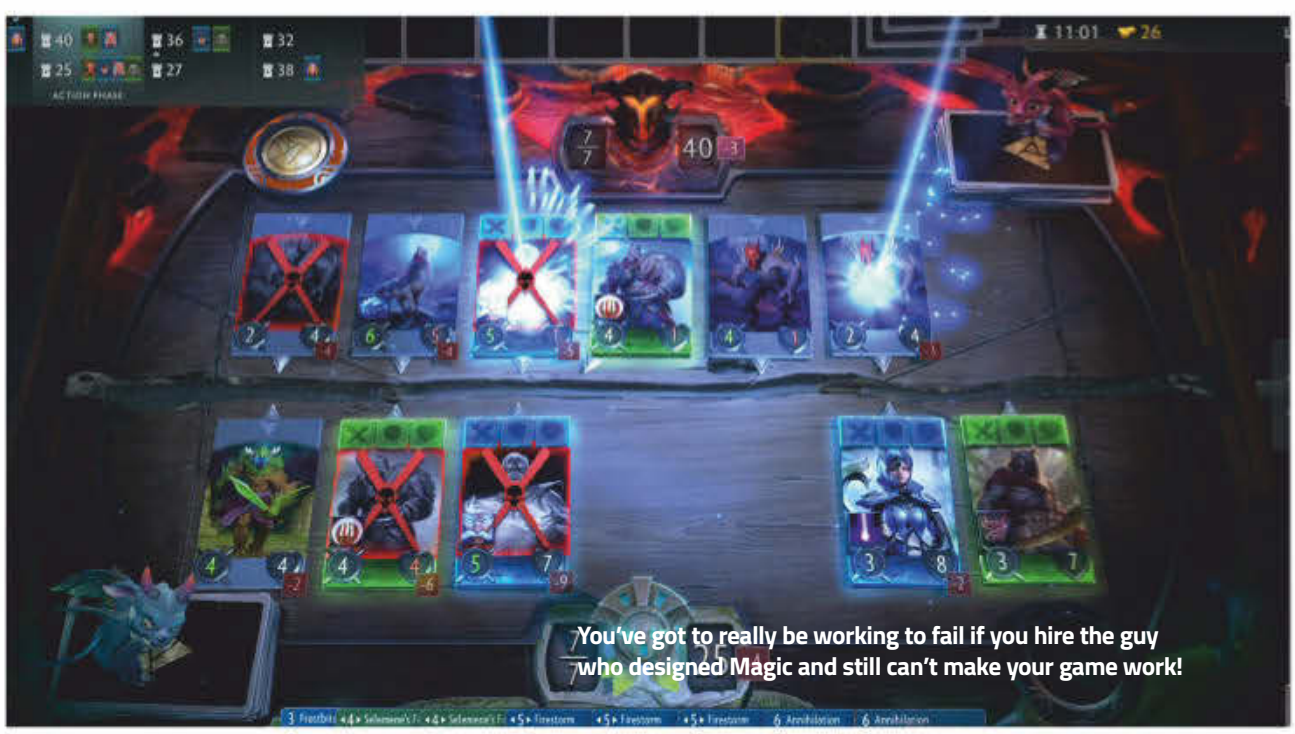
The alternative is mistrust and misinformation. The alternative is chaos.

In the Star Citizen community there is a practice known as 'theory crafting.' In the absence of any real, hard data about how the buggy US$250 million pre-alpha game will eventually mature into a playable product, Star Citizen backers will instead speculate. They postulate and ponder and pre-suppose. Every conclusion they reach is balderdash, but it's all very real to them.

I see something similar in the field of games journalism; some pundits will concoct plausible narratives to reassure themselves: "Sean Murray didn't really lie when he promised multiplayer in No Man's Sky at launch, but rather his whimsical mind blurred the distinction between his creative vision and what he was actually able to deliver." I've seen this line of reasoning used all over the place, where people claim that devs like Peter Molyneux and Chris Roberts are so brilliant that they don't understand when they're lying; that a person can be both a super-genius and a naïve simpleton.

It's absurd. But for many, it's reality.

Humans abhor an information vacuum. When companies don't effectively communicate the truth, their customers will concoct their own. Truth is, they might just decide that they'd be happier shopping someplace else... PC



You've got to really be working to fail if you hire the guy who designed Magic and still can't make your game work!

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In Focus

THE HIDDEN DETAILS OF DESIGN.

WEB 1.0

Artist and director Jay Tholen on creating a nostalgic alternate '90s internet for the wonderfully weird Hypnospace Outlaw. **ANDY KELLY**

OLD SCHOOL

1 "The old web aesthetic is fascinating to me, because all kinds of everyday non-tech people were being drawn into the digital world for the first time. The internet was a blank canvas. There was no visual consistency."

IMAGE CONSCIOUS

2 "For the bad pre-rendered animated gifs I used old 3D software packages such as Wings3D and Bryce 5.5. I then converted them into my own 'Hypnospace safe' 64-color palette using Floyd-Steinberg dithering."

INTERNET EXPLORER

3 "For the browser I drew up a design and sent it to Mike Lasch, our programmer, who made it real and functional. Over time we added new features such as bookmarks, virtual pets, and a functioning media player."

NEW BUILD

4 "All of the pages in the game were created using the Hypnospace Page Builder, which we've bundled with the game for players to make their own. We're hoping to add support for creating networks of pages too."

GOLDEN YEARS

5 "If Hypnospace Outlaw has any kind of message, it's to scrutinise the fuzzy nostalgia we often cling to, and that very human tendency to measure everything against what we consider 'the good old days'."

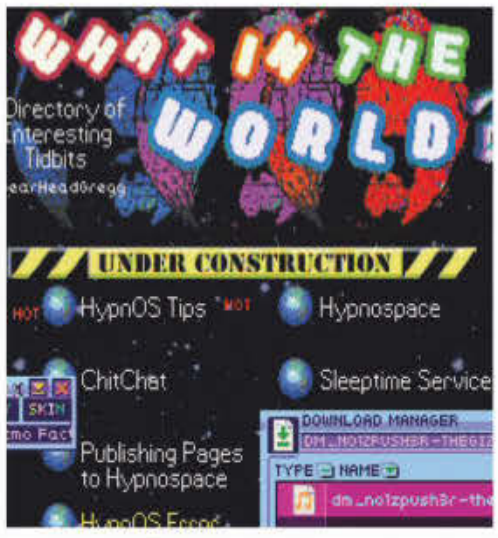
CUSTOM MADE

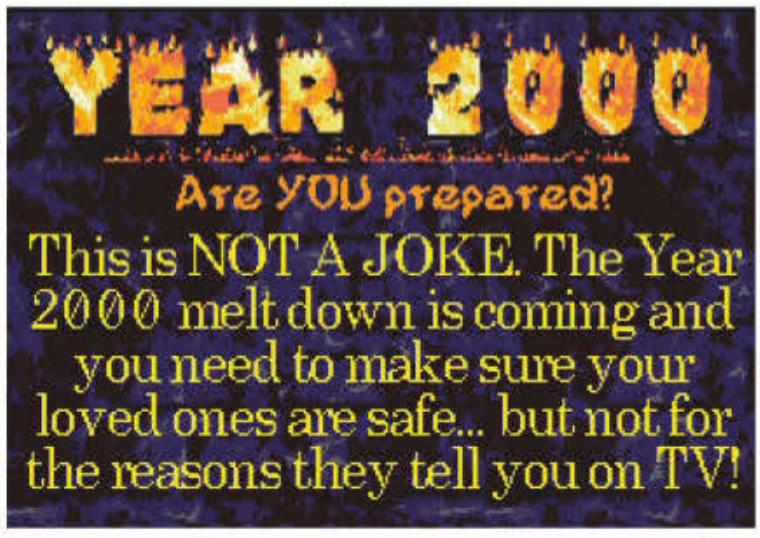
6 "Players can change their desktop wallpaper, visual/window color, sound theme, and screensaver. You can also add stickers to your desktop, customize your 'start' menu, and add fancy cursor trails."

LEFT: Old web pages were cobbled together from clipart CD-ROMs or stolen from other sites — an aesthetic Tholen and his team have brilliantly recreated in Hypnospace Outlaw's web.

BELOW: The drama of the dreaded 'Millenium bug' is one of many old internet things skewered by Hypnospace Outlaw. The game celebrates the 90s web, but isn't afraid to highlight how silly it was too.

RIGHT: It wouldn't be the old internet without an under construction gif. Hypnospace will feature several classic animated gifs from Sevenoaks, a prominent gif maker from in the 1990s.




YEAR 2000
Are YOU prepared?
This is NOT A JOKE. The Year 2000 melt down is coming and you need to make sure your loved ones are safe... but not for the reasons they tell you on TV!

Inside Dev

MAKING GAMES IS HARD.

Licensing Limitations

The limitations of the licensed game process. By **XALAVIER NELSON JR**

As easy as it is to poke fun at licensed games like the infamous Aliens: Colonial Marines, looking at them from a different perspective raises a fascinating question. The process of making a licensed game involves a maze of stakeholders, scheduling concerns, and legal maneuvering. Why do good creative opportunities and good developers release projects that are less than the sum of their parts?

Tom Forsyth is an industry veteran who spent years at Valve and Oculus, among other companies. Once upon a time, though, he was a programmer on Blade 2. "For arcane licensing reasons," Forsyth recalls, "we only had permission to use Wesley Snipes' likeness in one place — the box cover — but Mr Snipes could not appear anywhere in-game. Of course, Blade had to be in the game, and he had to look as close to the Blade in the movie as possible, but without looking too much like Mr Snipes, who played him in the movie. No, this didn't make any sense to anybody else either. So the artists were driven mad sending both concept and in-game art to the publisher, and every even week it would be 'this looks too much like Snipes' and every odd week was 'this doesn't look like Blade'." Concerns like this one just chewed further into a razor-thin schedule, on top of the regular complexities of development. Blade 2 currently holds a 49 on Metacritic.

"It's a strange experience working on a project, knowing that it is not going to turn out well, knowing on some level that it's not even really intended to," says Steve Rhoades, a level designer for 2006 action game The Sopranos: Road to Respect. The studio was divided between two masters: THQ, their publisher, and HBO, the owner of the license. "I remember meetings at a table with at least four or five folks from HBO present," Rhoades says. "A lot of teleconferences. 7 Studios' process was pretty document heavy by modern standards, and I wrote every level design doc for that game. My life for a few months was revising each document based on HBO feedback, then sending the doc to THQ, revising for their feedback, rinsing, and repeating. I'm honestly not sure how many folks at either HBO or THQ had veto power, but both of their word was law from our perspective. Most of HBO's feedback was to remove the stuff THQ had just asked me to add, and the reverse was equally true." Rhoades left the studio before the game finished production, but his experience of working to contradictory mandates isn't rare.

> "The artists were driven mad sending both concept and in-game art to the publisher"

DO WE SAVE THE CHEERLEADER?

Steve Bowler was one of the lead developers on Gemini: Heroes Reborn, a game created to tie into the upcoming TV show's release. "We were told on one of the conference calls that our biggest problem on the game art-wise was that 'it didn't look anything like the show'," Bowler said. "When we asked if we could see footage of the show, we were told 'no'. We couldn't even fly out there in a locked office with our phones confiscated. They just said there was no way we were going to be able to see footage beyond the couple of trailers/commercials that were released." The shortage of information impacted character abilities as well. Some abilities would be rejected for being too similar to abilities used in the show, but the studio couldn't offer a list for the developers to avoid. "I had to come up with a game where we called them back later with our laundry list of our A, B, and C tier abilities we wanted to use, and we'd go through them one by one and they'd tell us if we could use them or not," said Bowler. His team ultimately had 11 months to produce the entirety of the game, as well as the framework of a tie-in mobile project.

The stories go on and on, even for well-received projects like Friday the 13th: Killer Puzzle. The license for that franchise is now trapped in a legal limbo that keeps all of the creators involved from doing anything further with their creations.

When you see a bad licensed game, it could be that its development was an utter disaster. However it's even more likely that everyone involved wanted to release something special, but didn't have the time, corporate structure, or resources to enable its creation. PC

XALAVIER NELSON JR.
I'm a full-time game writer and narrative designer, with credits inside and out of gaming.

The devs of The Sopranos: Road to Respect were told not to "screw up" plans for future seasons of the show, despite not being told what those plans were.

FAR LEFT: Blade 2 was unable to use the likeness of the actor Wesley Snipes.

LEFT: After Warner Bros found out that the people behind the PC version of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone had contact with J.K. Rowling without their approval, the devs were forced to remove Hedwig from the game.

LICENSED LEGENDS

LICENSED SUCCESSES THAT MADE A MARK ON THE UNIVERSES THEY ARE ATTACHED TO

BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM/CITY/KNIGHT
The *Batman: Arkham* series created a distinctly gritty version of the character and his rogue's gallery, to the point that new media was able to be licensed from Rocksteady's twist on the franchise.

MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR
Taking liberties with the *Lord of the Rings* canon brought change to a familiar universe, for better (playable black badass Baranor) and worse (sexy Shelob, about which the Editor of this magazine some SOME OPINIONS).

ALIEN: ISOLATION
Treated like a valid addition to the *Alien* mythology and disconnected from the schedule of any other media, *Alien: Isolation* injects a gorgeous, sprawling, and terrifying interactive experience into the margins of the *Aliens* universe.

THE DARKNESS
An adaptation of comics published by Top Cow, games about *The Darkness* ditch much of the wider supernatural machinations of its world in favor of grounded, hyper-violent, surprisingly smart tales of emotion and madness.

The Odd Couple

Because, if one game isn't meeting your needs, they can always be met elsewhere.

Over the years, I've used this page, allocated to "a female perspective", to raise examples of how I play games that I thought were (maybe not so much a female way of playing as) daft things that I do. Then, of course, people write in or tweet me to tell me that they do it, too. Saving your game excessively? Join the club, apparently. Crushing on Geralt? I mean, yes. The column I wrote about playing too much Civilization, collapsing into bed and then organising troops across my doona all night, while half-asleep, probably got the most enthusiastic affirmation of them all.

So, I'm going to tell you about another thing that I do. Is it unique this time? Who knows? It feels like it could be. It starts with my son and I playing Pikuniku, which is a very silly game. In fact, the excessively wiggly leg animations briefly drew the entire family over for a look. It's a physics-based platformer and also kind of an adventure, unless you're interested in multiplayer, in which case there's a lot of unnecessary kicking of each other, as you solve levels.

Somewhere around the time my son and I had senselessly smashed all of the pottery in the house of a purple slime with a flower on their head, who was maddeningly not mad about the pottery, I realised I needed a change. I mean, don't get me wrong, Pikuniku is a great game. Hours of laughs. It's World of Goo meets Samorost 3, with the cute experimenting, absurd communities of creatures and a dubious mega-corporation. But when a game is extremely One Thing, I often need to find the antidote to it; a game that is opposite, in every way.

Pikuniku is new. I needed something old. Pikuniku is ridiculous. I needed a sensible game. Pikuniku is colourful, twitchy, and has goofy, repetitive music. I needed straightforward graphics, cerebral gameplay, and a serious score. Do you know what I reached for?

(I feel like the answer is obvious.)

Heroes of Might and Magic 3's Chronicles! At this point, I lost my son, but regained my sanity. It's turn-based strategy, in which each, short campaign introduces a new, differently-balanced faction. I haven't played this in years, but it's highly rememberable.

MEGHANN O'NEILL
Meghann O'Neill reports that her son did wake her up recently because of a 'Fortnitemare' which is probably his version of a 'gamer dream.'

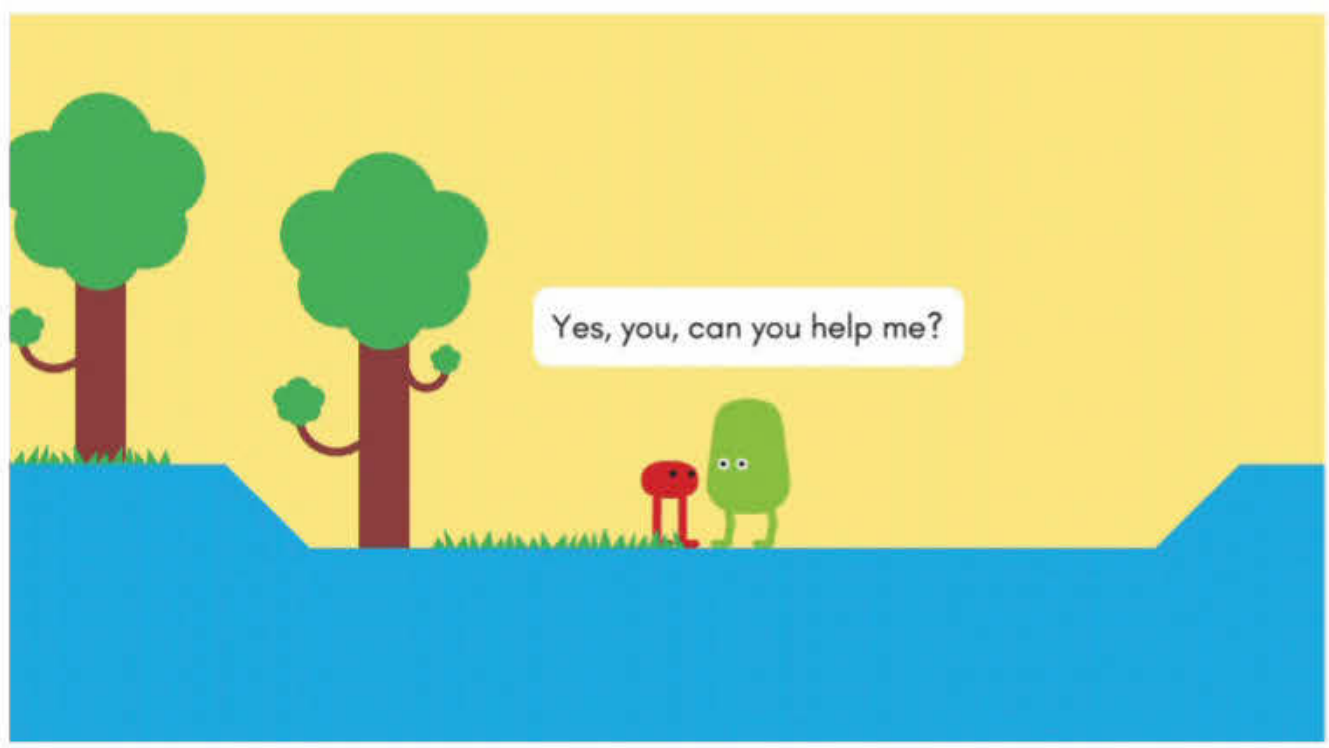
As I followed the dry (but universal) story of Tarnum's rise to power (and what came next), through the wastelands and to wonderful places, I counted hydras and hitpoints, always ensuring I was developing towns with the next, strategic goal in mind. I chose my characters' specialisations carefully, to context, and boosted the difficulty pretty quick. Soon enough, my son was like, "Can we play Pikuniku?" and my answer was, "Yes," because, really, there's also only so much HOMM3 you can play without a change. Every scenario plays out the same.

I think 'needing variety' is valid, given I can play something like Dragon Age forever. There's a battle, then story, then crafting, then a new quest I decide to embark upon. Variety keeps me engaged. In Pikuniku, environmental storytelling rewards perceptiveness, but only if you're still engaged enough to be perceptive. My holiday through HOMM3 allowed me to notice that Pikuniku's brown columns had been tree trunks, right before a beautiful tree (inhabited by a cute, pink leaf) fell at our feet, cut down by the sinister (yet supposedly good) robot flying machine.

What's the point of all this? Whether or not other gamers 'need variety' in the same way as I do, I used to think that I played games in weird ways, maybe because I'm a gal, but definitely because I'm me. The first lesson here is probably that we're all gamers and there are some things we do just understand about each other. Despite our differences, as people, games were always the common link. The idea that we may only have needed a "female perspective" to prove how similar we are is a pleasant twist.

I do wonder if online personalities are equally as influential to how someone becomes a gamer, these days, however. Watching my kids watch Youtubers play, then play themselves, is weird. I mean, they get useful strategy tips and such, but they also emulate the way these people talk about the game, engage with its mechanics and react to success/failure and so on, rather than discovering their own ways to engage. I wonder if I'll have as much in common with my gamer kids as I've had with PCPP readers, given they're being forged differently. Perhaps time (and how a person learns) is becoming the more relevant divide. PC

> **"Pikuniku is new. I needed something old. Pikuniku is ridiculous. I needed a sensible game."**



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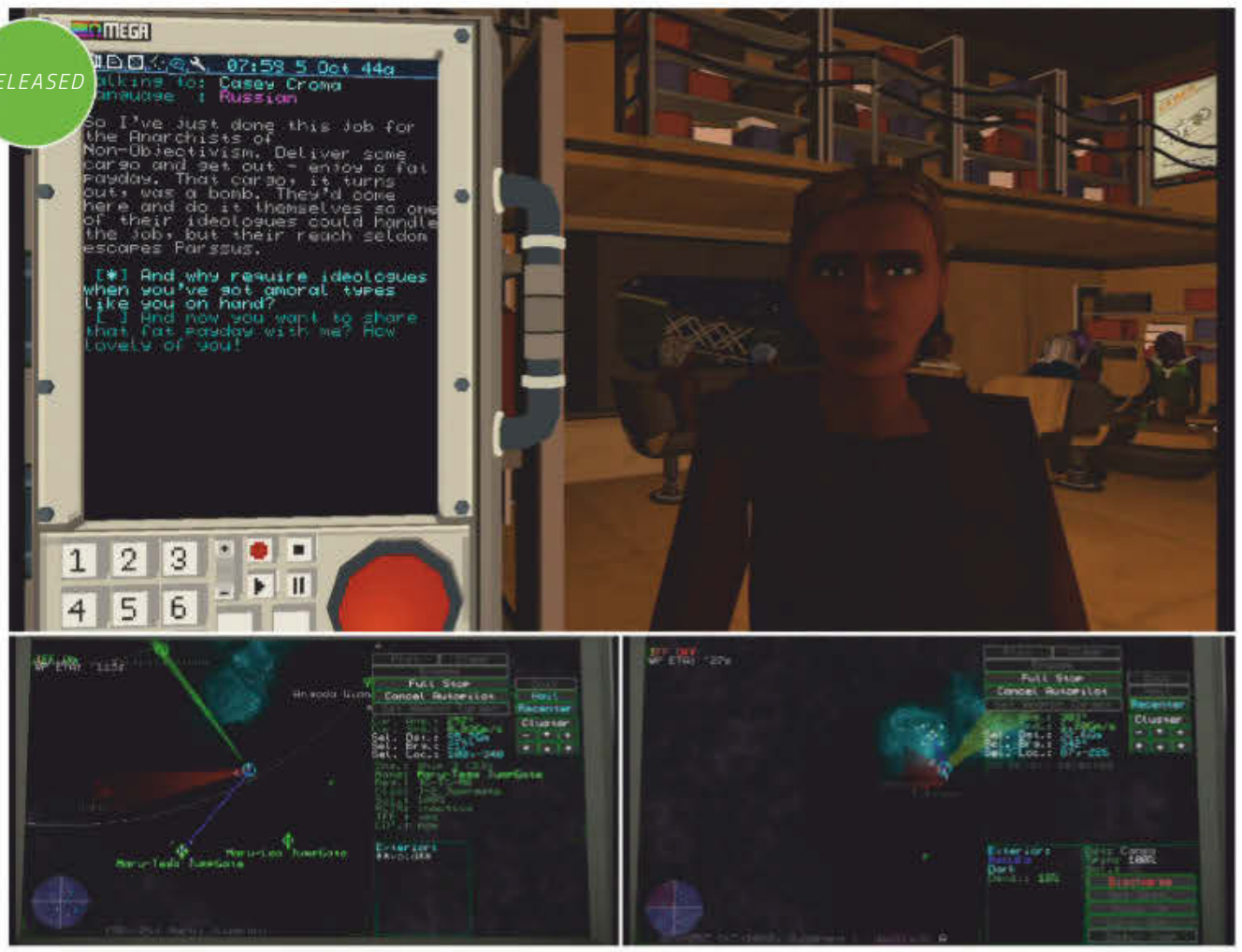
A collection aside

MEGHANN O'NEILL curated the 20 videogames showing at Sydney's Play Fare recently, and we decided these games were too good to keep to ourselves. As well as Objects in Space, now fully released and ready to be featured, we discovered games from a range of genres, many of which are delightfully artistic and experimental. Sydney-based titles like Projection, by Shadowplay Studios, were also in attendance, but we have chosen to introduce you to some of the ones that we haven't covered.

OBJECTS IN SPACE

DEVELOPER FLAT EARTH GAMES • **PRICE** $28.95
http://objectsgame.com/

RELEASED


MEGA
07:58 5 Oct 44a
Talking to: Casey Croma
Language : Russian
So I've just done this job for the Anarchists of Non-Objectivism. Deliver some cargo and get out - enjoy a fat payday. That cargo, it turns out, was a bomb. They'd come here and do it themselves so one of their ideologues could handle the job, but their reach seldom escapes Parssus.
[*] And why require ideologues when you've got amoral types like you on hand?
[ ] And now you want to share that fat payday with me? How lovely of you!
1 2 3
4 5 6

Objects in Space could not be further from an idle game, yet that's the way I most often play it now. I've road-tested it at conventions, and it certainly attracted attention at Play Fare, but I love it even more, as a simple part of my everyday. Typically, I'll be enroute to a new station, with cargo pods full of components, computers, or other gear that I've been contracted to haul across the galaxy. Autopilot is handling my ship's systems, pirates are unlikely, so I'll switch to the scene that is my space bedroom and I'll start doing (in real life) household chores. If I hear the ship taking damage, or that I'm being hailed, I'll quickly return to the game's window.

It is basically like having another life to lead, one in which I arrived to a new frontier 45 years late, after a jump went wrong. They were planning to build a gate back to Earth. The planets here were supposed to have been inhabitable. This was intended to be the best of humanity, starting anew. Although my arrival caused a little stir of excitement among those still interested in history, I have no choice but to freelance as a pilot. There's no other role for me. I feel shocked and disenfranchised, yet determined to survive in this curious, unexpected future.

It wasn't until I met a fellow pilot, who had been tricked into undertaking a terrorist act, that I began to grasp the political complexity of this place. Could I take them to safety? It would be dangerous but I was only otherwise occupied by ferrying explosives to Leo. Why hadn't I considered that my regular explosives run to Leo might be fueling the very terrorism I was now bearing witness to? I was just taking their money. This contract is no accident, however. It's the first of many chances I'll have to decide how to exist here, as I explore and learn. I even saved this pilot's life, when a biological wire they were carrying started to kill them.

> "Why hadn't I considered that my regular explosives run to Leo might be fueling the very terrorism I was now bearing witness to?"

They also paid me 10,000c, which allowed me to purchase a jump drive. My previous contracts had been worth a couple of hundred each. I couldn't go back through Maru, until local authorities had forgotten our daring escape, so I began taking 'the long way around', through uninhabited star systems. Next I learned why the game is called, "Objects in Space." When there's no safety nearby, like space stations or the law, an unknown object on your radar can be terrifying. The waveform it's emitting might provide a clue to what it is, but only if you can successfully interpret it.

I suffered my first death at the hands of pirates, while trying to quietly maneuver to the jump quadrant of an unnamed star. Thankfully, the game loads back to the last place you docked. Too many hours are invested to make any kind of real death fair. I've never bought weapons for my ship, because there's enough violence in this new frontier, as I see it. This is a valid, if risky, approach. It would be equally as valid to become a pirate, or a bounty hunter, but I increasingly see myself as a misplaced anarchist, clinging to some other version of how things were meant to be.

Obviously, in dangerous places, or with less peaceful playstyles, the Objects in Space experience then demands your full attention. Either as an idle game or not, it requires

commitment. It's impressive at shows like Play Fare, but I didn't understand how detailed, evocative and truly awe-inspiring this local creation was until I took it home. I don't feel I've adequately explained it on this page. It's really something you have to discover for yourself and in your own way. Just know, for starters, that there's a whole other life waiting for you across the stars.

I should mention that I've become friends with designers, Elissa and Leigh Harris, at game events held in Sydney over the years, which is why these pages comprise an "impression" of Objects in Space, more than a formal review. Also, with the game's complexity in mind, I asked them to share some friendly advice for new players, so that (if you decide to buy the game) you can get a jump on finding the content which may interest you.

PCPP: ***Objects in Space requires you to pilot your own spaceship. Any tips for learning the ropes?***

Leigh: Play with everything. Spend time seeing what things do. Watch what uses power, increases your emissions and makes you more visible. Scroll through the different monitors on different screens. Just trust that we've designed things so you don't get punished for every wrong button press. Learning by failure is part of the fabric of the game.

PCPP: ***What is the best way to get rich quick?***

Leigh: Well, there are missions which let you rob powerful people and make some serious cash early on. But you may find yourself unwelcome in certain systems if you do this. Otherwise, keep completing contracts for the same company. At the start, they pay very little, but quickly become profitable.

PCPP: ***What happens when we anger the law?***

Leigh: This is a game about choices. You can absolutely make yourself a persona non grata in some systems if you anger the wrong people. But most mistakes in front of authorities will net you fines or incoming torpedoes, rather than a pragmatic reason to self-exile. That said, things can be grey. The game doesn't judge you for choosing to be selfish every now and then. And the best ways to really get under the skin of the law is embedded in the game's quests and stories.

PCPP: ***How can pirates be tricked and avoided?***

Elissa: I often carry a basic cargo pod with me, filled with a piece of scrap metal. That way if a pirate threatens me, I can dump that one bit of cargo and jump away, head for the nearest nebula or dock at a nearby starbase. If I'm lucky, by the time he realises he's been given a load of scrap, I'm either undetected or far away. If that's not an option? I often shadow authority vessels. Most (but not all) pirates will avoid attacking you if you're right near a police cutter.

PCPP: ***Where should players search for story and lore?***

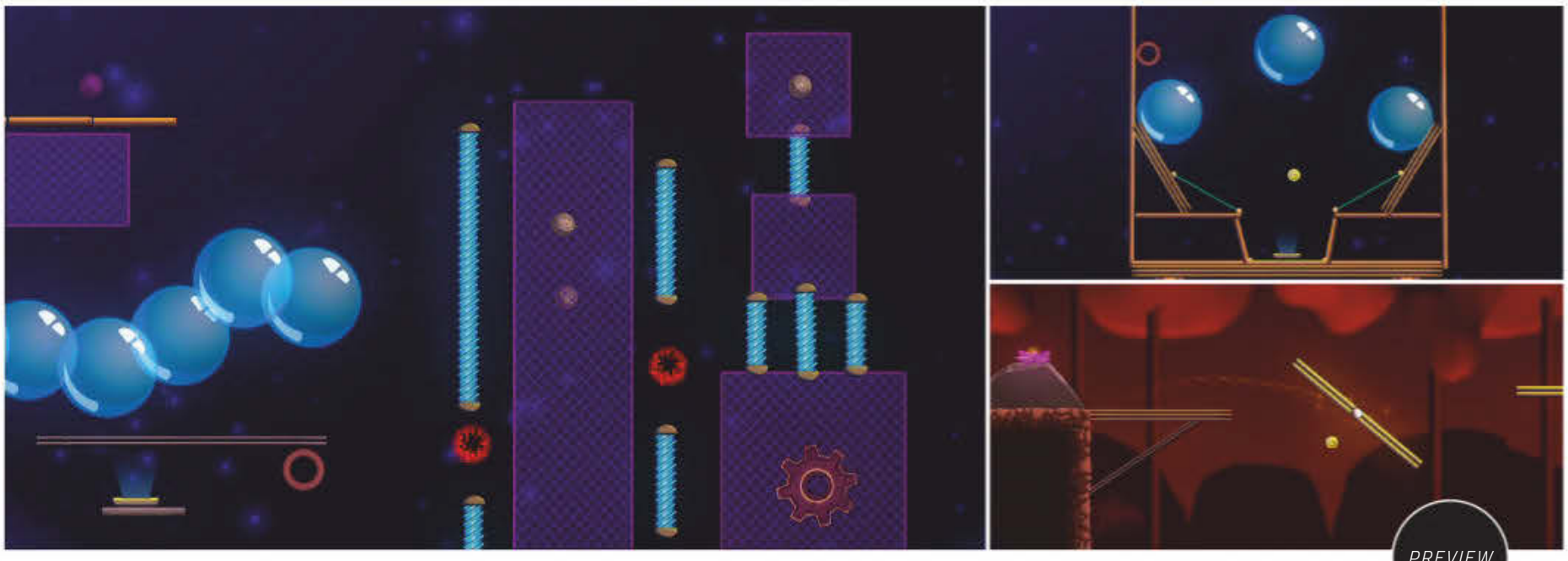
Leigh: There are plenty of small stories to engage with near where you start, but the most interesting stuff is deeper into the game, in both time and space. Unlike contemporary RPGs, quest-giver NPCs are only around to start missions when it makes narrative sense for them to be there, so they'll only be there for a limited time, and many won't appear until the mid or late game. If you check out new places and play for longer, you'll get to the less common and more unique and interesting stories.

> "We approached the design wanting a naturalistic world, so there's never any repeated dialogue."

PCPP: ***What is your favourite thing about the game and how do we find it?***

Leigh: It's the intersection of the game's complicated systems and its narratives which make it shine. There are dramatically tense moments, sure, and there are moral choices which ask a lot of you, but they're made more interesting by your other predicaments. A choice to screw someone over is more interesting if you've been making mistakes and getting into lots of debt. The narratives don't assume your situation, so there are heaps of pleasant surprises in there when the two interact in interesting ways.

We approached the design wanting a naturalistic world, so there's never any repeated dialogue, you're seldom the galaxy-saving hero, you occupy a space between other people's lives rather than living in a world which feels awkwardly made *for* you.You'll miss opportunities, fail and mess things up, you'll be unsure if you made the right choices and that's fine; it's all part of living in this game world. You exist here, but it's not yours.



PREVIEW

AMBERIAL DREAMS

DEVELOPER CUAUHTEMOC "ODDGOO" MORENO • **PRICE** TBA
https://www.amberial.com/

Amberial Dreams was a hit with my nine-year old at Play Fare. In fact, there was a small queue building behind him, so I played this at home, after the event. This was probably for the best, given how terrible I was at it. The experience is, in essence, about control. It's a platformer, but you are a ball that can only move left and right. Getting around requires experimenting with the environment, particularly with features that propel you upwards, like trampolines, magnets, and large bubbles. There are hazards to avoid and you're touching small bubbles to open exits.

Finding safe passage requires finding a combination of precise speed and timing as you propel yourself from a number of sequential parts. One level, Acrobat Cross, is simply three planks which rotate freely from their midpoints and you have to navigate to the other side of them, without overbalancing. Of course, every collision creates a lovely, musical sound, just to make fun of my inability to beat this level. And, of course, my son beat it. But don't worry. There's a level editor. I'm going to build him something near impossible.

The most important part of fighting is making sure you do cool sounds.
Please don't eat me! I'm all juicy and tender! Not rubbery and tough like other squids.

RELEASED

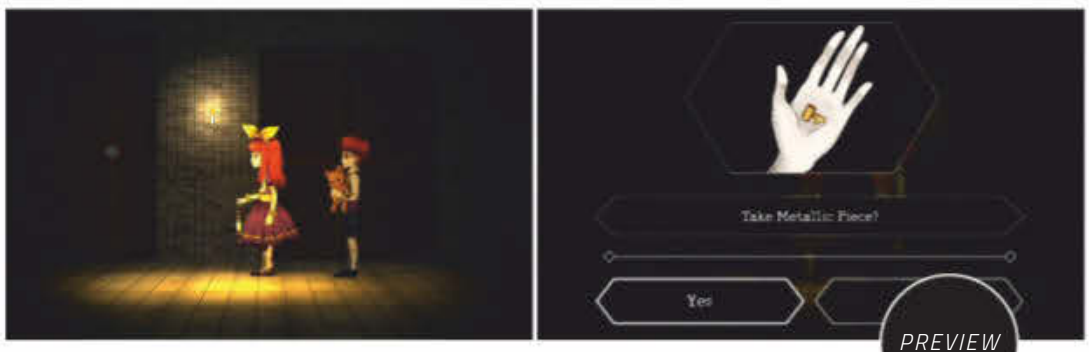
ADVENTURE BOY CHEAPSKATE DX

DEVELOPER PAUL GEORGHIOU, JEREMY SWANSON • **PRICE** $5
https://store.steampowered.com

Many of the games at Play Fare were pre-release, so it was nice to see Adventure Boy Cheapskate DX, an expanded release of what was previously a free point-and-click adventure game. Goofy, teen protagonist, Benson, pops into a store to grab some haw flakes and a thief steals his bike. Typically, the townsfolk aren't overly helpful. They have their own problems, many of which you will solve along the way to finding the thief. The story is light and funny. Everything talks, including the apples in the fruit shop, who just want to be wanted.

I get that.

At Play Fare, I ruefully mentioned to designer, Paul Georghiou, that if you were stuck on a puzzle in the 80s, you had to wait for a kid in your computer studies class to crack it. Adventure Boy is moderately challenging, logical, and fair. I asked for one hint. Most interestingly, each inventory item, when shown to a person, generates unique dialogue and this is incredibly motivating. If you can't figure out what a new item is for, showing it to everyone is endlessly, and unexpectedly, fun. This is a satisfying adventure game, for fans of the genre.



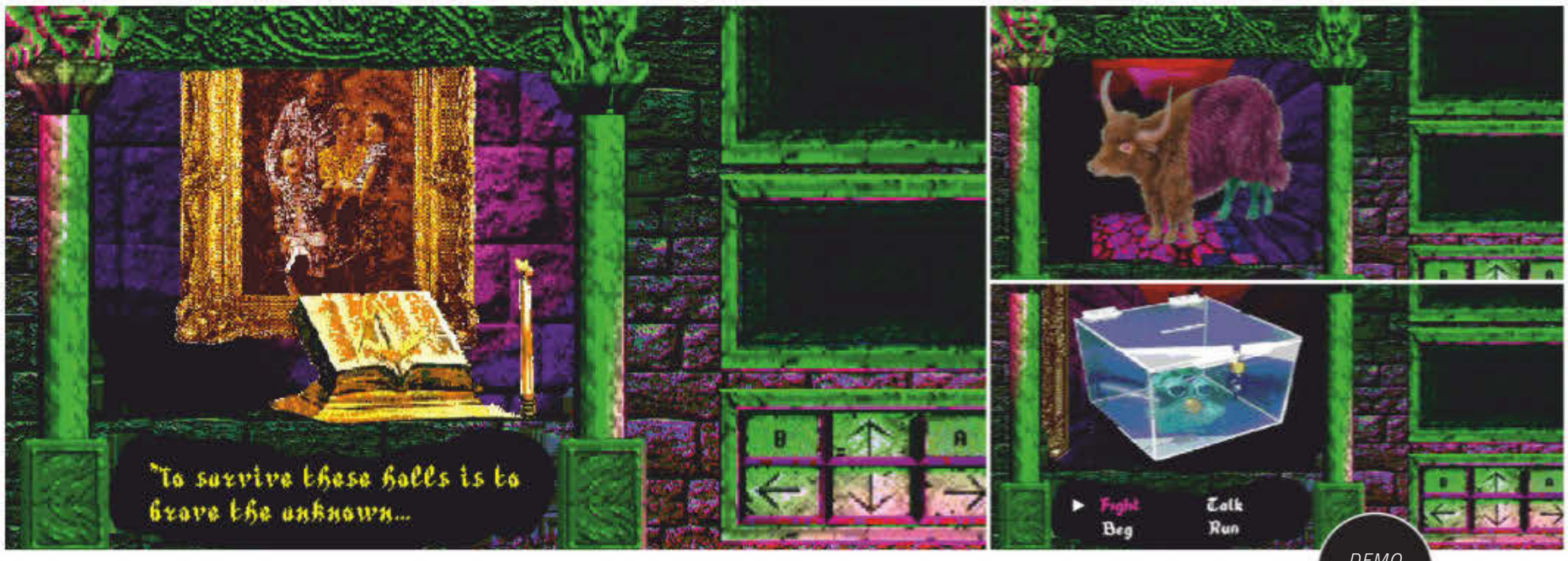
PREVIEW

CLEA

DEVELOPER INVERTMOUSE • **RELEASE** DEMO AVAILABLE • **PRICE** TBA
https://store.steampowered.com

One of the cool things about attending a game event in Sydney is knowing some of the exhibitors outside of games, too. I first met Clea's designer, Marcus Lam, at a creative writing workshop as part of Sydney Writers' Festival. Although he has previously released interactive fiction titles, Clea's compelling narrative relies more on what isn't said. Why does Clea's brother have to make sure she takes her daily potion? Who are the Chaos Servants, why do they want her and what will they do to her when they catch her? Time to find a place to hide.

In terrifying 2.5D, you're sneaking through corridors, treading lightly. You can peek left or right, as well as through doors. If you hear wet, rapid footsteps, you may get a glimpse of the horror that is stalking you. Flush a toilet and draw them to a handy dead end but, if there's only one door out of the bathroom, is it worth the risk? My son played this at Play Fare and looked distinctly traumatised when he was done. I'm playing it at home, by myself and, actually, what was that noise? Maybe I'll take a break and see if Robyn next door wants a coffee …



DEMO AVAILABLE

CURSEDOM

DEVELOPER CURSEDOM • **PRICE** CHOOSE YOUR OWN PRICE, INCLUDING FREE
https://glamow-research.itch.io/cursedom-official

According to designer, Pewka Zilla, Cursedom was all but abandoned. After a positive reception at Play Fare, however, she is now considering a Kickstarter campaign to fund a final release. The aesthetic initially caught my attention. It's like a psychedelic iteration of Ultima Underworld that I remember (slightly incorrectly) from childhood; familiar, yet surprising at every literal turn of the dungeon's walls. Assets and images are sourced, and repurposed, from games of the 90s and early internet archives, which also contributes to a kind of mistaken nostalgia.

You're a Curseling, cast into a bewildering maze, seemingly for eternity. You'll meet characters who are as confused as you are, or who have been trapped somewhat longer and can offer advice. In a way similar to Undertale, you're given options for how to interact and progression happens as you find items and solve a range of Myst-like puzzles. Imagining what objects like the Table of Shapes or the Wall of Eyes might do is endlessly intriguing. I'm definitely hoping for the rest of Cursedom to be successfully Kickstarted. A demo is available on itch.io.

PREVIEW

GAULLIE'S PEACE

DEVELOPER GLAMOW RESEARCH • **RELEASE** BROWSER BASED PREVIEW AVAILABLE • **PRICE** FREE
https://glamow-research.itch.io/gaullies

At Play Fare, I also chatted with the general public about how they loved indie games but didn't know how to source them. If I didn't know Pewka from local events and showing Cursedom, I wouldn't have learned about Gaullie's Peace. Although not technically showing at the event, this is exactly the kind of evocative experience I hope people are able to find. It is the first third of a seemingly simple Bitsy game, yet I feel like I've already undertaken an incredible adventure. I found a journal inside of an old mountain/friend, I got lost at sea, I inhaled pollen and died.

The tiny art is endlessly intriguing and open to interpretation. Where am I now? A temple, an underground railroad, a lava cave. Is that a rock? Can I traverse it? Can I walk into the sky? I entirely forgot that I was looking for my spouse's extract. Their what? I'm honestly not sure whether I hope to find out in future chapters. I feel as if I already engaged with this game exactly as I wanted to; as the little girl who couldn't stop wandering around her own Adventure Construction Set creations.

I suspect Gaullie's Peace will touch you in a way that's unique to you.

PREVIEW

KEYBIRDS

DEVELOPER TEMPO LAB GAMES • **RELEASE** PREVIEW • **PRICE** TBA
http://supershark.studio/keybirds/

Towards the end of the night, when Play Fare's games showcase was winding down and people were filtering into the music space to hear acts like The Consouls and Batterie, I decided to play Keybirds. I was aware the game involved typing and, to be completely honest, I was too exhausted by my kids' touch typing homework to garner much enthusiasm. Of course, this turned out to be the most hilarious and enjoyable experience I had all day. In fact, I could probably replace my kids' touch typing homework with Keybirds and we'd all be a lot happier.

In the opening level, Blue tells her parents she's been accepted into Birdsong Performance Academy. They were expecting her to study law. You're then launched into typing repetitive, jazz lyrics like, "law, no thank you, law's not for me, law's not for Blue," to music composed by Julian Sanchez; one of the abovementioned Consouls. You also have to press 'enter' on every fourth beat, to make a clap sound, so every word is emphasised, as if there's a live, frustrated, clap emoji after every word.

Keybirds was an unexpected, final highlight of Play Fare for me. It was fun, innovative and polished.

10 to Watch

1 Octopath Traveller

DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX
DUE: JUNE 2019

Yeah, look, we're disappointed too – you do not in fact play an eight-limed adventuring mollusk. Rather, it's a JRPG of the cutesy school with eight separate characters, with their own journeys through the game's narrative.

Octopath Traveller has a unique and really quite striking art style, combining retro 2D graphics inside a beautiful 3D world. Combat is turn-based, with the trick being to discover each enemy's weaknesses and then ruthlessly exploit them.

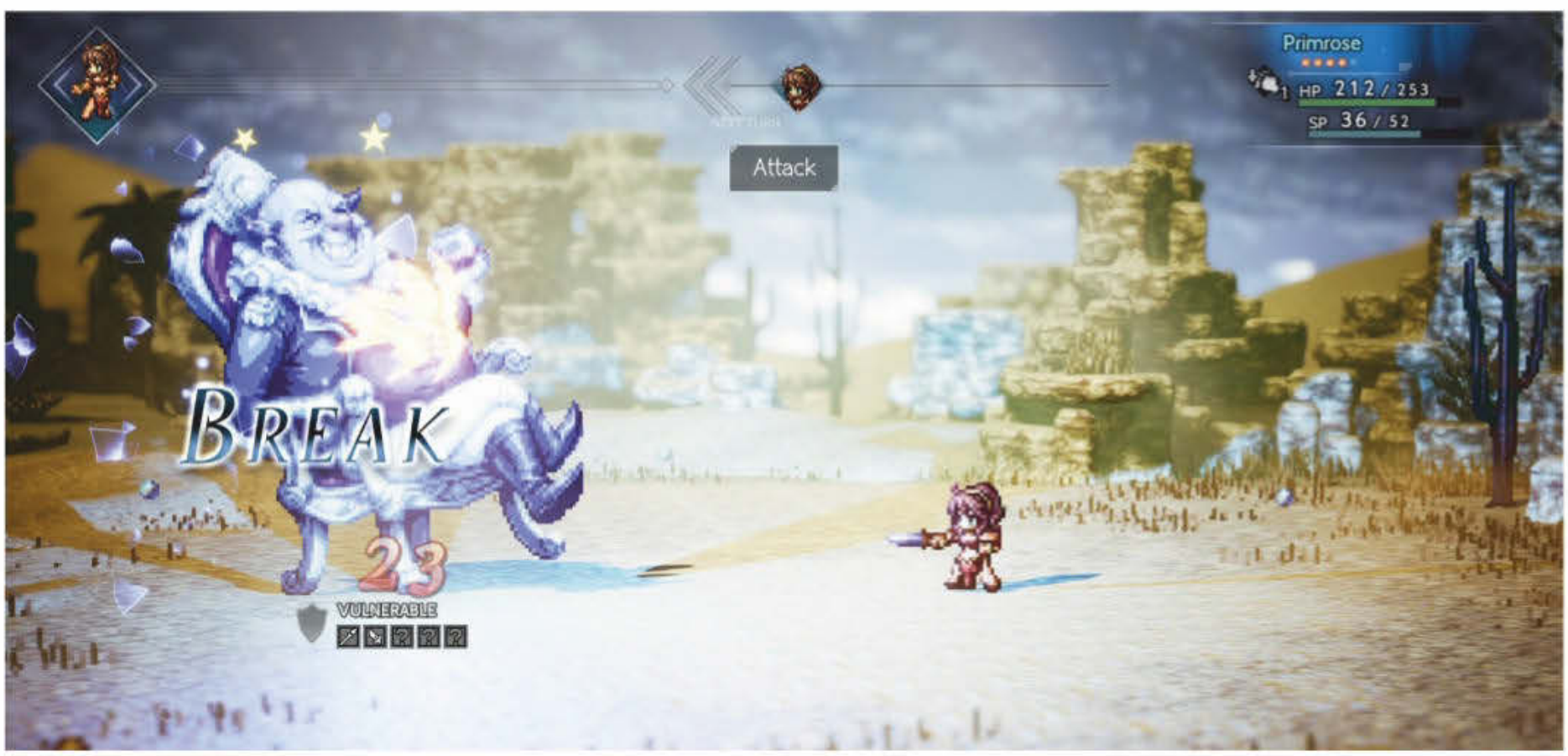
2 Sin Slayers: The First Sin

DEVELOPER: GOONSWARM
PUBLISHER: BLACK TOWER ENTERTAINMENT
DUE: OUT NOW

Hey, guess what!? This is the demo for the full game, which a Kickstarted successfully a little while back. It's another JRPG-style game, though with an art style more grounded a gritty, realistic, medieval aesthetic, while still evoking that classic retro feel.

This free demo cover two to three hours of the game, and features five of the game's ten main characters to play with. Levels are randomly generated, and your choices can have real impact on the world.

"In the prologue, players will be able to try out all main gameplay mechanics and play through the breathtaking beginning of our story in the world between worlds. Our heroes have just awoken from the black sleep of death. Now they must battle uncounted ghosts, demons and lost souls in search of a first ray of hope," says Lead Game Designer Pavel Shestakov.



3

Borderlands 3

DEVELOPER: GEARBOX SOFTWARE • **PUBLISHER:** 2K GAMES
DUE: SEPTEMBER 2019

Look, you know what the game's gonna be about. Loud noises! Quirky characters! Writing that will make you laugh yourself to an early change of underwear! It's got four new PCs, a whole swathe of new mysteries, and yes, massive YUGE amounts of guns and gear.

"For the past several years, the team at Gearbox Software has been devoting every ounce of our passion, creativity and love into making Borderlands 3 the biggest, baddest and most ambitious Borderlands adventure we've ever made," says Gearbox Software President and CEO Randy Pitchford. "Borderlands 3 is being crafted not only as a love letter to fans of the series, but also as an ideal entry point for new players to jump-in alone or cooperatively, on or off-line, in the latest and greatest installment of the definitive best-in-class benchmark shooter-looter."

4

Elden: Path of the Forgotten

DEVELOPER: ONERAT PTY LTD • **PUBLISHER:** ANOTHER INDIE
DUE: 2019

Okay, sure, the game's first press release opens with a HP Lovecraft quote, so you know this game will either be a) full of horrors from beyond the mortal world, b) vaguely racist, and/or c) some combination thereof. Since the game is more Lovecraftian than actual Lovecraft, we're guessing option a at this point. Set in a delightfully atmospheric medieval setting, players must battle ancient monstrosities and avoid getting lost in an unforgiving world. The combat is very reactive, and more than a little on the hard side… but who said beating a cut-price Cthulhu would be easy?

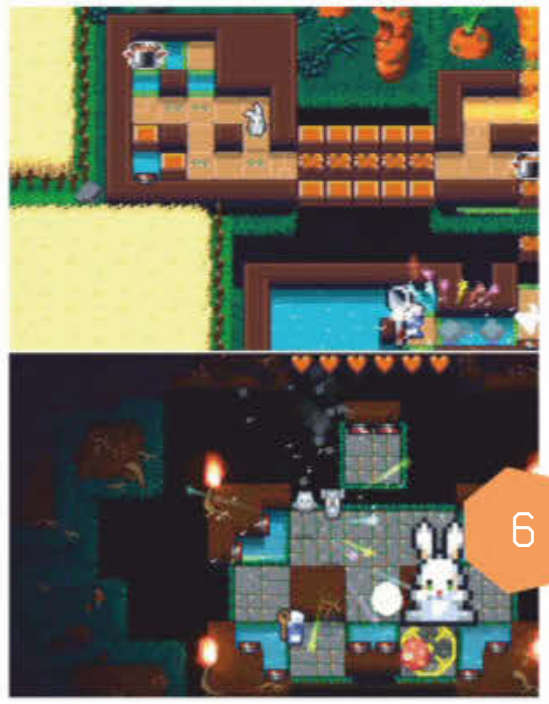
5

Guardians of Ember

DEVELOPER: RUNEWAKER • **PUBLISHER:** GAMEFORGE
DUE: IN BETA

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Not only is this EA's attitude to Star Wars games (see later), it can often work for F2P games as well. The new version of action RPG Guardians of Ember has relaunched into open beta, with a whole mess of improvements.

"We saw a considerable number of players joining Guardians of Ember from several countries when we announced the new local servers, and so we have put a lot of effort in making the game available in their native languages so that they can enjoy the same immersive experience as other players do in their own language" says Alexander Rösner, Founder and CEO of Gameforge. "Guardians of Ember has been available in English, Spanish, and German throughout the Closed Beta. Starting today, the game will also be available in French, Italian, Turkish, and Polish."



6

Radical Rabbit Stew

DEVELOPER: PUGSTORM • **PUBLISHER:** SOLD OUT
DUE: 2020

To be honest the very fact that this game is made by a company called Pugstorm has me right on board already, but the fact that it's also about making stew (yum!), from rabbits! (I love rabbit stew!) in space (SPAAAACE!!!) has me already pretty hyped.

7

Doughlings: Invasion

DEVELOPER: HERO CONCEPT • **PUBLISHER:** HERO CONCEPT
DUE: MAY 201

The game's premise is therefore pretty simple – you, a gun toting… something, must shoot down ever advancing waves of spaceborn… things. The plot is kinda beside the point; you get to modify your powers, advance your skills, and even make use of funnky alternative shapeshifting powers but really it's all about that state of advanced shooting flow that these games can drop you into.

8

Sniper Elite V2 Remastered

DEVELOPER: REBELLION • **PUBLISHER:** REBELLION
DUE: 2019

Everyone loves a remaster. Everyone loves killing Nazis. So, therefore, Sniper Elite V2 Remastered must be approaching possible Game of the Year territory, right?

Well, probably not, but I do know I got a weird thrill from watching bullets whiz through fascist craniums when I played the original, so seeing that in 4K must be even better. I guess?

Well, that's what Rebellion's banking on, and the company is also adding a mess of other new features into the re-release.

9

'83

DEVELOPER: ANTIMATTER GAMES • **PUBLISHER:** TBC
DUE: TBC

Cold War gone hot is one of the most enduring military fiction tropes of all time, made popular by countless novels and films and even tabletop wargames. Now, the guys who brought you Rising Storm 2: Vietnam are taking on the challenge, with a new large-scale FPS depicting the massive fight between NATO and the countries of the Warsaw Pact.

Sturt Jeffery, Lead Designer on the project describes persistent warfare as: "A way to give all players a meaningful opportunity to contribute to the war effort, and one which drives the ongoing development of content in line with the player-driven narrative of the war. We're also planning some interesting ways for prominent players to achieve recognition above and beyond the usual in-game items, achievements and titles previously experienced in similar games."

10

Star Wars: Fallen Jedi

DEVELOPER: EA • **PUBLISHER:** RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT
DUE: NOVEMBER 2019

Any year now, EA's going to manage to let a studio put out a Star Wars game that is actually what punters have been waiting for. We've almost had it a couple of times, now, but, at last Fallen Jedi might be the single-player, loot-crate-free, narrative-based Star Wars game we've all been waiting for.

The story's hardly groundbreaking – you're one of the few Jedi who appears to have survived Order 66, and while you've been hiding pretty well… the game's about things going not so well. There's action, epic locations, stirring music, and the hopes of a lot of fans riding on this game's shoulders.

Sure, it looks like you're basically playing a young Matt Damon, but so far? We're intrigued.

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RESIDR

After 15 years in the grave, **BLOODLINES 2** brings the vampire-RPG back from the dead, and it's bigger, darker, and more ambitious than ever.

By Rick Lane

ECTION

Here are three words I never thought I'd write: Bloodlines is back. It's been almost 15 years since Troika Games' vampire RPG first launched, winning and breaking hearts in equal measure. Bloodlines remains one of the most stylish and intricate first-person RPGs ever made, with a truly remarkable amount of depth and dynamism baked into its dark and seedy Los Angeles. But Bloodlines' premature launch also meant it was riddled with bugs. After years of community support, it is still a challenging game to grapple with.

Bloodlines is one of the great 'what ifs' of PC gaming. What if Troika had been given another six months to sharpen Bloodlines' fangs? What if the game hadn't launched on the same day as Half-Life 2? What if the likes of Leonard Boyarsky and Tim Cain and Brian Mitsoda had been given a shot at a sequel, to capitalise on all the lessons they'd learned?

We'll never know the answers to those first two questions. But we will, finally, get an answer to the third. "If they'd asked me to do another one back then I would have done it," says Brian Mitsoda, lead narrative designer on Bloodlines and Bloodlines 2. "I think one of the best things about the World of Darkness IP is that there are — just in one city alone — hundreds of stories. »

There's always more stories to be told."

Mitsoda is working with Hardsuit Labs, the developer and creative lead behind Bloodlines 2. The game is being published by Paradox Interactive, which acquired White Wolf in 2015, and thus owns the World of Darkness IP. Indeed, the acquisition of White Wolf by Paradox was the trigger for Bloodlines 2's development. In an unusual turn of events, HSL began working on Bloodlines 2 the moment they heard about the acquisition, pitching the idea directly to Paradox.

"When we got wind of Paradox acquiring the World of Darkness IP, within about ten minutes I had my creative director Ka'ai Cluney come into my office and say 'We need to contact Paradox. Do you know anybody there, because we need to pitch them a game?'," says Andy Kipling, the CEO and co-founder of Hardsuit Labs. "We spent November and December and January putting together a pitch that we could show them at DICE. My assumption, for what it's worth, was Paradox had a clear plan in place and that we would be coming in from out of the fold to try and make a hail-Mary pass."

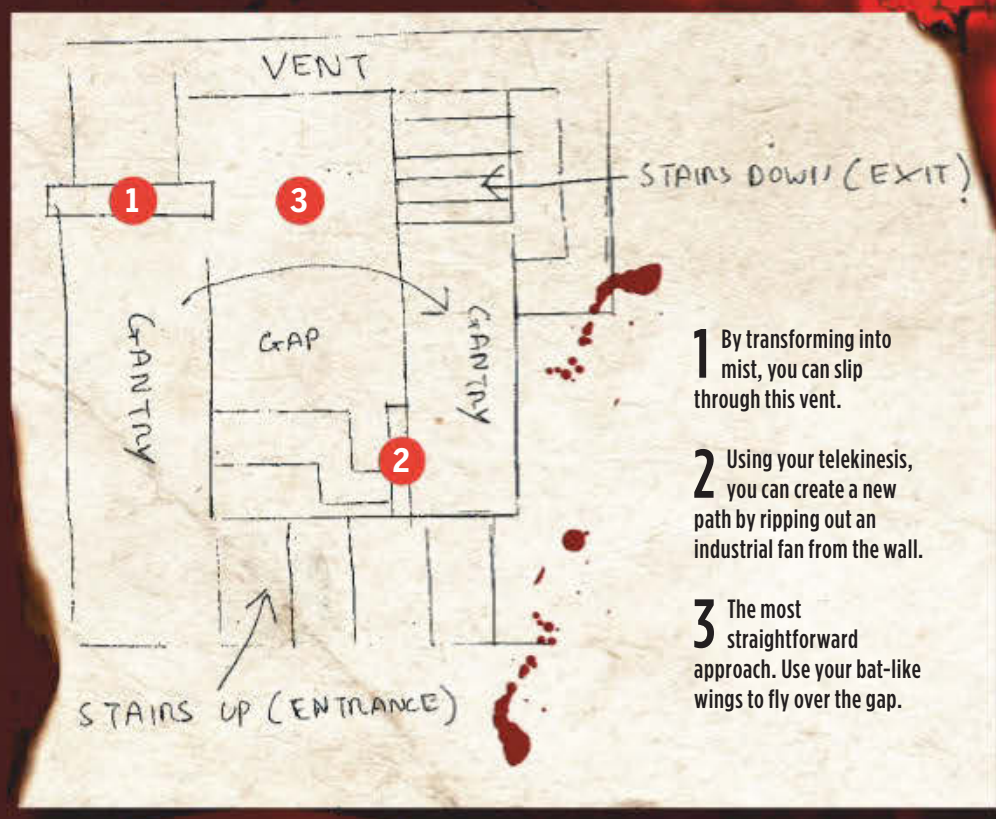
Kipling's assumption was correct. Paradox had plans. "But it was also something we considered quite valuable and that we didn't want to give out too easily," says Florian Schwarzer, product manager at Paradox Interactive.

Unsurprisingly, Paradox was sceptical about Hardsuit's plans. "I [went] into that first Skype meeting with them expecting to watch a burial," Schwarzer says. Instead, Schwarzer was thrilled by the presentation, to the point where they immediately began discussing pre-production. "This was very much Hardsuit Labs taking a tremendous risk and getting us to the point where we made a decision for them. Nothing more, nothing less."

It's a risk Paradox is confident has paid off. At the company's HQ in Stockholm, I'm presented a 30-minute in-game demo, controlled by Bloodlines 2's lead producer Christian Schlütter. It's the first time Paradox has shown the game to anyone outside the company or Hardsuit Labs, and the production team is still uncomfortable saying the game's name out loud, often referring to it by its codename — Project Frasier.

POWERING THROUGH

LEVELS ARE DESIGNED TO BE NAVIGATED IN MULTIPLE WAYS.



1 By transforming into mist, you can slip through this vent.

2 Using your telekinesis, you can create a new path by ripping out an industrial fan from the wall.

3 The most straightforward approach. Use your bat-like wings to fly over the gap.

BELOW: Bloodlines 2 is set in Seattle. The first hub surrounds Pioneer Square.

BLOODY BACKSTORY

Bloodlines 2 opens with a direct call-back to the original. Your character — whose appearance and backstory can be customised before the game starts — awakens on the floor of what appears to be a courthouse. It transpires you're both a witness to and a suspect of a Mass Embrace — a supernatural terror attack in which a group of humans, including you, were assaulted on the street and illegally turned into vampires. Representatives from multiple factions, including the Camarilla, are present to watch your trial and execution. After recounting

events from your perspective, however, a fire rages through the building, enabling your escape.

Bloodlines 2 is built in Unreal 4, and plays mostly from a first-person perspective. The escape from the burning courthouse doubles as the tutorial. Unlike the first Bloodlines, you don't pick your clan during character creation. Instead, all players start-out as a "thin-blood", a weaker type of vampire with a unique set of powers.

Hardsuit explains that this was a practical choice both narratively and mechanically. "There's a lot of political problems with thin-bloods and being a thin-blood is gonna make it more of a challenge to exist in the World of Darkness. That's a good place to start in an RPG," Mitsoda explains. Kipling adds that starting as a non-clan vampire gives players a chance to "understand what a clan means so they can make more informed choices, rather than making a decision up-front and getting 30 minutes into the game and going, 'Damn I wish I'd chosen something else'".

Players will get to choose a clan later in the game. Paradox isn't prepared to reveal which clans are present. But they confirm there will be five playable clans in the game. This is slightly fewer than Bloodlines 1, but Hardsuit and Paradox want to focus on making each clan distinct in their playstyle.

"We wanted to pick those clans that

MAIN: This fellow grills you in the introduction.

IT TRANSPIRES YOU'RE BOTH A WITNESS TO AND A SUSPECT OF A MASS EMBRACE

deliver a clear player-fantasy," says Schlütter. "If I'm someone who just likes to punch people in the face, we have that clan for you. If I'm someone that… in a normal roleplaying game, would play a wizard or something, we also have a clan for that." Moreover, your choice of clan will provide access to unique abilities and locations. "If you want to see truly everything of the game, you will want to play it with different clans," Schwarzer confirms.

ABOVE: Hardsuit Labs has plenty of experience with Unreal Engine 4.

MAIN: As in the first game, public displays of power will violate the Masquerade.

While clan-specifics are under-wraps, the demo revealed some of the powers you'll wield as a thin-blood. Thin-bloods can grow bat-like wings, transform into mist, and wield objects from a distance via telekinesis. At the end of the tutorial, players will have to choose one of these powers.

Environments, meanwhile, are built so you can navigate them in multiple ways. Alongside the original Bloodlines, Paradox cites games like System Shock, Deus Ex, and Dishonored as inspirations. "These are games that give you freedom to explore the world, but also to tackle different situations in the way you as a player want," Schlütter says. "We bring your playstyle to the table, that is something that we need to deliver with Bloodlines 2."

Eventually, your vampire escapes from the courthouse basement into what appears to be a ruined underground city. Bloodlines 2 is set in contemporary Seattle, and the ruins belong to old Seattle, which was almost literally paved over after a fire gutted the city in 1889. In your role as a vampire, Seattle's underground will play a significant part, although Paradox and Hardsuit won't specify how just yet. Hardsuit is happy to discuss the reason for choosing Seattle as the setting, however. "One, we live here, which makes it a lot easier to gather reference," Mitsoda says. "Two, the biggest thing about choosing Seattle as a location is it's under-utilised as a setting."

VAMPIRIFICATION

Like other west-coast cities, Seattle is undergoing a period of radical and controversial transformation, largely due to the presence of huge corporations such as Amazon. Hence, themes like gentrification and the divide between the old and new faces of Seattle will form key parts of the story.

"One thing that we have in the city is this kind of identity crisis. You've got how Seattle has been over the last 100 years, and how it is changing due to the tech side and the money side," Mitsoda explains. "We have billion-dollar companies, trillion-dollar companies. And of course wherever there's power and money you're gonna get vampires. It's like leaving cheese out."

We first glimpse Seattle as we emerge on the waterfront beneath Pier 57, its iconic Ferris-wheel illuminated in neon (Bloodlines 2's Seattle exists in perpetual night, like the first game's LA). Moving toward the pier, our vampire encounters a man holding a mobile phone, which begins to ring. On the other end of the line is a mysterious woman, who instructs us on the basics of feeding.

This works much like the original Bloodlines, with a sweet-spot between getting the optimum amount of blood and accidentally killing your victim, losing humanity in the process. We're also instructed to meet someone up on the pier. As with Bloodlines 1, the game is fully voiced, and while neither Paradox nor Hardsuit will spill details, Mitsoda boasts that Bloodlines 2's voice cast is "maybe the best of any game".

Inside a building on the pier, our vampire is attacked by a group of thugs. Combat, particularly melee combat, was one of the weakest elements of the original Bloodlines. Hardsuit wants to make certain this is addressed in Bloodlines 2. "Ka'ai's been working on a first-person melee combat system for years," says Russ Nelson, CTO and co-founder of Hardsuit. "We knew we needed to have that up-close and personal feeling when you're in a fight."

Unlike the original, both melee and ranged combat are viewed from first-person. It's a highly improvisational system, with your vampire using his fists, objects in the environment and his powers to gain an edge. For example, your thin-blood can yank firearms out of enemy hands using telekinesis, or fly into the air to literally get the drop on an opponent. Also players will be able to equip two melee and two ranged weapons at any a time. But as Schwarzer says, "How you and your equipment looks at the end of that fight might be quite a bit different."

However you approach combat, Hardsuit is keen to ensure that it communicates your supernatural power, speed, and resilience. Even as a

LET THE RIGHT ONES IN

CHARACTERS WHO MAY RETURN IN BLOODLINES 2.

SMILING JACK

The smart-mouth vamp who shows you the ropes, Smiling Jack seems like an obvious choice to bring back from Bloodlines.

JEANETTE/THERESE

We'd be very surprised if Jeanette and her alter-ego Therese didn't crop up to mess with your head at some point.

PRINCE LACROIX

Lacroix is killed at the end of Bloodlines, so this one seems a stretch. But these vampires are hardy creatures...

thin-blood you can comfortably tear through an armed gang of humans using only your fists.

At a higher level, you'll be able to enact devastating special moves, for which the camera will zoom out into third-person. You won't only be fighting humans, there will be plenty of tougher enemies in Bloodlines 2, including numerous types of vampire.

After the fight, we encounter a man who turns out to be a fellow thin-blood created in the Mass Embrace. We don't get much time to compare notes, however, as he is immediately killed by another vampire who whispers "You're not on my list" to us before vanishing. One of the side-quests in Bloodlines 2 involves looking for the remaining vampires created in the Mass Embrace — the "Unsanctioned Seven". Schlütter notes this quest will explore, "What happens to a completely normal human, with all their wants and needs and life situations, when they suddenly get turned into a vampire."

After the incident at the pier, for example, we travel to our first safehouse, an apartment sub-let by a reclusive vampire named Dale, who is our guide into the world of Bloodlines 2 much like Smiling Jack was in the original. He's also the first character you talk to at any length. As you'd expect, dialogue plays a huge role in Bloodlines 2, with your skills and abilities affecting your conversation options. Mitsoda was also keen to retain the noir-ish vibe and black humor of Bloodlines 1.

"This game has just been incredibly fun to write. The characters are some of my favorite characters that I've ever done for a game, and Paradox has given me a lot of freedom, which I'm not used to from the publisher side, just kind of going, 'What do you want to do?'." Mitsoda won't go into specifics, but Paradox hints that among those

RIGHT: As a vampire, you're pretty handy in a fight.

FAR RIGHT: I've heard of trial by fire, but come on.

UNLIKE THE ORIGINAL, BOTH MELEE AND RANGED COMBAT ARE VIEWED FROM FIRST-PERSON

characters will be familiar faces from Bloodlines 1.

After giving us the basics, Dale lets us into the apartment. Inside is a board covered with notes and documents, put up by the vamp we just saw murdered. Bloodlines 2's approach to quest design is closer in spirit to the original than more modern RPGs, in the sense that quests won't be flagged by NPCs with exclamations marks floating above their heads. You'll need to explore to uncover new stories and adventures.

Among the documentation, for example, is a missing cat poster. As you explore Seattle, you'll find greater concentrations of missing cat posters in certain areas and, if you take the time to investigate the phenomenon, you can eventually discover where all the cats have gone, and why they have disappeared…

While some quest lines can be stumbled upon, others may arise depending on how you play Bloodlines 2. Unlike the first game, there are multiple factions alongside the Camarilla that you can work for. "You'll have a different experience based on who you're working with, and you can even, you know, insult factions to the point where they won't work with you anymore," he says. "You can really do a number on your reputation in this game," Mitsoda explains.

CODE OF CONDUCT

A crucial part of this reputation is the Masquerade, the code of conduct to which all vampires are expected to adhere. The key word here is 'expected'. You can violate the Masquerade in small ways, such as being spotted feeding by another human, or bigger ways, like going on a public rampage. Both will have ramifications for you and the city. People will be less likely to go out at night, meaning you'll have fewer bodies to feed on, while repeated violations may cause Seattle's chief vampire, Prince Cross, to send supernatural enforcers after you.

Schlütter demonstrates this at the end of the demo by venturing into the first of the game's multiple city-hubs, Pioneer Square (Bloodlines 2 follows the hub-and-spoke design of the original). He drops from a rooftop and publicly feeds on a civilian, which causes the police to start chasing him and triggers a Masquerade violation.

Importantly, the Masquerade isn't a one-way descent into chaos. You can restore your Masquerade rating to a certain extent. One way to do this is to join Prince Cross' clean-up crew, which clears up the messes left behind by Masquerade-violating vampires.

ABOVE: Now that's what I call hub-and-spoke design.

MAIN: Mitsoda says the characters are among the best he's written.

The clean-up crew exemplifies the weirdness Mitsoda and Hardsuit are hoping to carry over from Bloodlines to the sequel. The organization is run by a man named Bart, who has seen every kind of horror imaginable and is completely numb to it. An early quest involves clearing the mess left behind after a disastrous romantic entanglement between a vampire and a human. "If someone exploded in a small hotel room, that's what that would look like," Schlütter explains. "You're there to just pick up the pieces. Literally, the pieces. And Bart just comments on whatever is there, eating his noodle-soup."

Hardsuit Labs want players to explore Bloodlines organically. This extends beyond how players find quests, to how they solve them. Your choice of character background will impact upon your experience. If you choose Police Officer, for example, then should you need to visit the police station, you don't have to find a back entrance and sneak around, you can just walk through the front. But even this comes with complications. "Your colleague will come and say 'Hey where have you been the last two weeks? Social security has covered for you, but you need to get back to work'," Schlütter says. It all sounds enormously ambitious. There are many other systems and ideas explained that I've barely touched upon. Schwarzer states that Hardsuit labs "set out to provide as many active unlocks as possible during your progression system"

GUESS THE CLANS!

FIVE CLANS THAT MIGHT BE A GOOD FIT FOR BLOODLINES 2.

BRUJAH

Brujah basically live to punch people. Since BL2 puts considerable emphasis on punching, this seems like an obvious choice for inclusion here.

MALKAVIAN

Certifiably insane, the Malkavian's unique dialogue choices made them one of Bloodlines' most distinctive classes. We'd be surprised not to see them in BL2.

NOSFERATU

The appearance of the Nosferatu means they violate the Masquerade by being seen. Given the focus on unique play-styles, it seems likely BL2 will include a stealth class.

TREMERE

Paradox explicitly mentioned a mage-like clan. The Tremere are masters of blood magic, so it's likely we'll see them causing some havoc in Bloodlines 2.

VENTRUE

Ventrue are able to dominate conversations through sheer force of will. This makes them an ideal class for players who like to talk their way out of situations.

HARDSUIT LABS WANT PLAYERS TO EXPLORE BLOODLINES ORGANICALLY

while the developers point out there will be extensive customisation options that let you enrobe your vampire however you like. Plus, there's the new Resonance system, which gives each NPC's blood a different 'flavor' based on their emotional state. Feeding from someone who is angry, for example, will provide a short-term melee damage buff, while repeatedly feeding on angry people will let you unlock a permanent passive bonus.

At this point, it's worth repeating the ambition of the original Bloodlines was as much a curse as it was a blessing. Since Bloodlines 2 aims to take those ideas further, it's natural for any excitement to be mingled with a little apprehension. But there are some key differences between the two projects. Bloodlines 1 was launched on an experimental engine the developers were grappling with for the first time, whereas Hardsuit Labs has plenty of experience working with Unreal 4. In addition, everyone on the team is keenly aware of the mistakes Bloodlines made. "Identifying what worked well in the first one and then what didn't, and either addressing those or avoiding those, was definitely a key part of that approach," Kipling observes.

SINK YOUR TEETH IN

Lastly, there's the publisher. Bloodlines 2 represents a watershed moment in Paradox's history. It's a follow-up to one of PC-gaming's most treasured cult classics, and a big-budget production in a genre that isn't the company's standard fare. Ebba Ljungerud, Paradox CEO, sums up Bloodlines 2's significance to the company. "There is so much love for Bloodlines 1. So there's an enormous amount of excitement of just doing something in this world," she says. "But it has to be really great, because otherwise it's never going to fly." ■

ABOVE: Melee combat looks much improved.

RIGHT: Seattle's iconic Pier 57.

How to have the best Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines experience today

Tips and tricks for modding and enjoying the janky cult classic.

Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines was blatantly unfinished when it came out in 2004. Some of the staff at Troika Games scrambled to get a patch together as the studio was closing, but even after that there was still work to be done.

It's janky, but worth playing today, especially in the wake of the Bloodlines 2 announcement. If you're revisiting Bloodlines or playing it for the first time, here are some tips that'll help you get the best experience.

DOWNLOAD THE UNOFFICIAL PATCH

1 A modder named Werner Spahl, aka Wesp5, took on the work left unfinished by the developer, and his Unofficial Patch is an essential fix. Now up to version 10.3, it has a changelog longer than some novels.

Downloading the Unofficial Patch from ModDB (*www.moddb.com/mods/vtmb-unofficial-patch/downloads/vtmbup103*) is an essential first step if you want to play Bloodlines today.

CHOOSE A PATCH VERSION

2 The second step is deciding between installing the Unofficial Patch's basic version or the plus patch, which restores cut content. (If you got Bloodlines from GOG it will come with the basic version, but without the plus option, so you should still download it from ModDB.)

Some of the things the plus patch restores are questionable, I'll admit. It puts a cop in the tutorial you can talk your way past to learn how the dialogue skills work, and his voice acting is pretty rough. There's an entire sidequest that ends at the library which "never even made it to alpha" according to Bloodlines writer Brian Mitsoda and had to be created essentially whole cloth, with writing that doesn't match the rest of the game. The existing sidequest where a character trades collectibles for sexy posters of the game's lady NPCs – even for a game about vampires, Bloodlines can be pretty thirsty – has been expanded and made even tackier.

And yet, I recommend the plus patch anyway. Some of its additions are rough around the edges, sure, but so is everything about Bloodlines. And among the changes are optional shortcuts that let you bypass some of the late-game combat dungeons that are its weakest points, and a sewer rat who is also a cab driver (though it only appears if you play a Malkavian). It's worth it.

USE THE CONSOLE WHEN NEEDED

3 It's also worth knowing that Bloodlines has a console you can open by pressing ~. Useful commands are "noclip" for when you get stuck in a door (it happens), "god" for godmode (enter "god" again to turn it off), and "giftxp n" (where n replaces your current unspent xp total). You may not want or need console commands to finish Bloodlines, but there they are just in case.

As for actual full-blown mods rather than patches, there are plenty (*www.moddb.com/games/vampire-the-masquerade-bloodlines/*), but none are the kind of thing you want on your first playthrough. In fact, given how

> While stealth and charm can get you through most of the early game, eventually you'll need to kill a whole mess of people.

different Bloodlines can be depending which clan you choose, it's worth a second run with the same setup before you even think about tinkering.

PICK A GOOD FIRST-TIMER CLAN

4 Though it's not up-front about this, two of the vampire clans are designed for a second playthrough. The Nosferatu appear so blatantly undead they can't show themselves in public, and you'll spend most of the game travelling via sewer if you play one. They're your hard-mode challenge run choice. The Malkavians have a limited ability to see the future, which means they have a lot of bespoke dialogue options that spoil twists because they know them already. Also, since those insights into the future drive Malkavians mad, playing one means hearing voices and having hallucinations. They're your new-game-plus clan, highly recommended to shake up your second go around.

Any of the other clans are fine for a first-timer. The rebel punk Brujah and animalistic shapeshifting Gangrel are good combat options, the blood magic specialists of the Tremere have the strongest powers, and the artsy bohemian Toreador and power-dressing corporate Ventrue are best at talking their way out of problems. Bloodlines is the kind of game where you can solve things multiple ways, so choose a clan that reflects your preferred play style.

PLAY IT LIKE AN IMMERSIVE SIM

5 Bloodlines is a vent-crawler, not a full on Deus Ex-style immersive sim, but still the kind of RPG where learning how to pick locks and hack computers is worthwhile. The Bloodbuff power can make you temporarily better at lockpicking and Auspex at hacking, if you haven't got quite enough points in the relevant skills. With a high enough score in Persuasion you can often blue-text your way out of trouble, and stealth is a valid option too.

You'll want to explore as well. Sidequests are easy to miss if, for instance, you don't stumble into the abandoned hospital in the Downtown hub, or if you don't hang out in nightclubs. There's a weapons dealer in each hub, often someone who needs to be persuaded to do business, and it's worth tracking them down. You'll be stalking the alleys to keep your blood topped up anyway, so poke around any suspicious places you find while sneaking about.

Bloodlines is not always great at being a stealth game, however. Your score in Sneaking is more important than sightlines, and a lot of places that appear well-lit have guards who act like they're in deepest shadow. Maybe those tunnels look so bright because vampires can see in the dark? Yeah, let's go with that.

LEARN TO FIGHT

6 While stealth and charm can get you through most of the early game, eventually you'll need to kill a whole mess of people. Chat with Nines Rodriguez, who hangs out at the Last Round, and he'll put it plainly, saying "a speech ain't gonna save your ass when you're staring down the barrel of a shotgun." (He also helps improve your Brawl and later your Melee skill if you ask for some pointers.)

Bloodlines hands out plenty of experience points, especially if you're tracking down all those sidequests, and you'll need to start jamming them into combat abilities eventually. Melee will deal with the first batch of fights (the fire axe is an excellent weapon at this point), but later it'll be worth going for Ranged Combat as well. The plus patch does add shortcuts that'll let you skip past the most boring combats – there's a computer you can hack to unlock a door to bypass most of the sewers, and if you make friends with NPCs Yukie and Chunk then max-out Persuasion they'll offer shortcuts too – but boss fights can't be avoided and they really are some bullshit.

Bloodlines can be a very 2004 game in some ways, and it still crashed to desktop a couple of times on my last playthrough (F9 is quicksave and you'll need it), but it's worth playing. Its combination of a contemporary setting, so-goth-it-shits-bats atmosphere, and strong character writing make it unique. Until the sequel comes out, there's nothing else like it. *JODY MACGREGOR* PC

DEVELOPER LARIAN STUDIOS • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE • **RELEASE** 2019
www.larian.com

Divinity: Fallen Heroes

A fantasy tactics game set in the world of Divinity: Original Sin.

Late last year, Larian — the Belgian developer behind the Divinity series — said it was moving on to "new stuff" after the success of one of 2017's best games, Divinity: Original Sin 2. And now we know what that project is — an RPG-infused turn-based tactics game called Divinity: Fallen Heroes which continues the story of Original Sin 2.

The focus in this game will be on squad-based strategic combat, but it'll retain some of the role-playing elements that define the Divinity games, namely talking to people, character relationships, customisation, and choices that alter the course of the story. For many Divinity fans this will be a surprising change of direction, even though Larian has made some strategy games in the past. I talked to the studio's founder, Swen Vincke, about what we can expect from the upcoming Fallen Heroes.

"We're huge fans of tactics games," he says. "Into the Breach was one of our favorite games of last year. When we were making Original Sin 2 we had a lot of discussions about things that we could change in the combat, but we didn't have time. So we thought, what if we make a tactics game?

"But in our game, story will define everything that happens in the missions, and everything that happens in the missions will define the story. And from this, Fallen Heroes was born."

Set a few years after Original Sin 2, Fallen Heroes sees the return of Lucian the Divine, who tasks you, a commander, with arresting the half-demon Malady.

"She has stolen powerful doomsday weapons from the Divine Order, and they're afraid she'll use them in a fit of anger," says Vincke. "But things are not what they seem."

"It is a story in its own right," he adds when I ask if being familiar with the series is a requirement to enjoy Fallen Heroes. "People who haven't played Divinity will be able to enjoy it. But we really wanted to continue with the characters we'd developed in Original Sin 2. We like them, fans like them. Fans will love that you can now control Malady in battle. If you played Original Sin 2 it'll feel like coming home. But if you haven't, you'll meet a whole bunch of interesting characters."

BRIEF ENCOUNTER

Larian is aiming for each hand-crafted mission in Fallen Heroes to be around 20-30 minutes long, but there'll be some downtime as well. "Between missions you're aboard the Lady Vengeance, and here you'll meet the heroes from Original Sin 2, as well as some new characters," says Vincke. "You'll talk to them and make choices that will define what happens in the missions, and what missions you'll be able to access. There's real choice here. You can also upgrade technology, unlock new heroes, and buy consumables to take into missions.

"You have multiple rooms, and in these rooms different characters will appear depending on what's happening in the story. You can interact with them using the conversation system from Original Sin 2. Some characters can even leave you if they don't agree with what you're doing. They may also join you in combat, bringing unique abilities with them, depending on choices you make in the story."

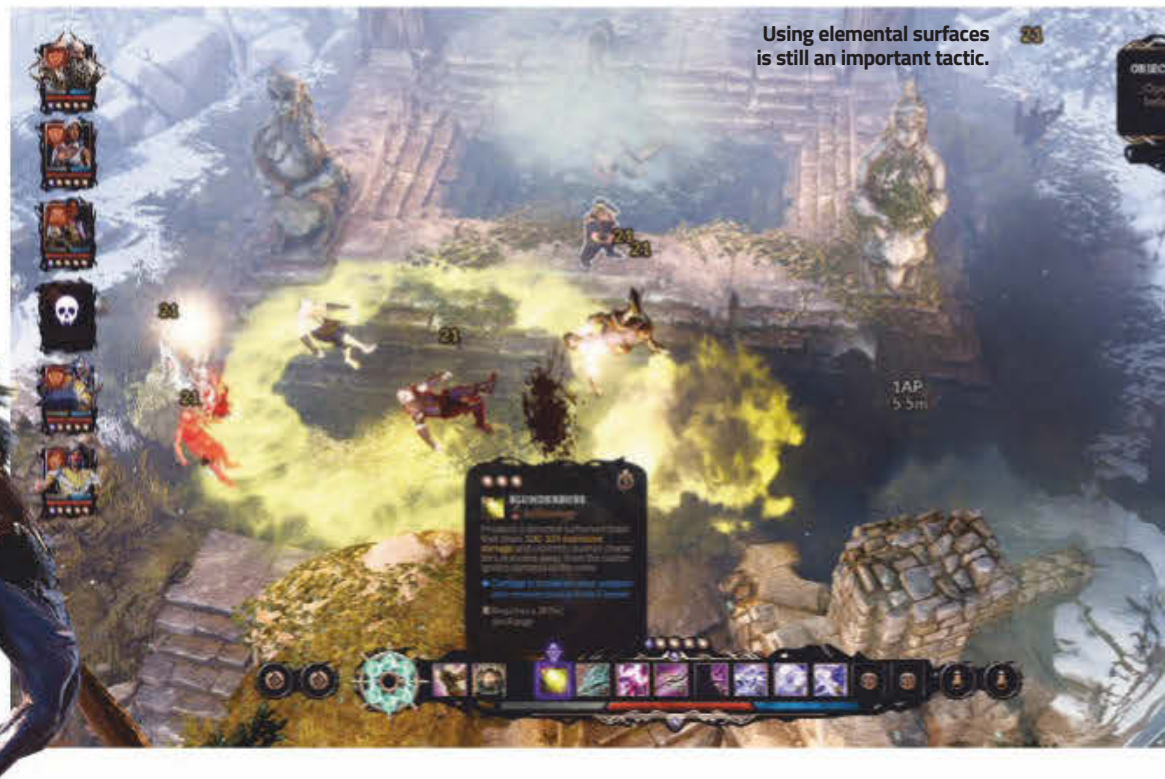
I ask Vincke to explain how combat in Fallen Heroes compares to Original Sin 2. "The changes are different enough that it's going to feel fresh. On the other hand it's familiar enough that you'll understand what your tactical opportunities are.

"You'll have to adapt your thinking a little bit. The biggest change is that it's now squad-based. We have around 200 skills and over 30 unit types, and that creates a lot of combinations and possibilities on the battlefield."

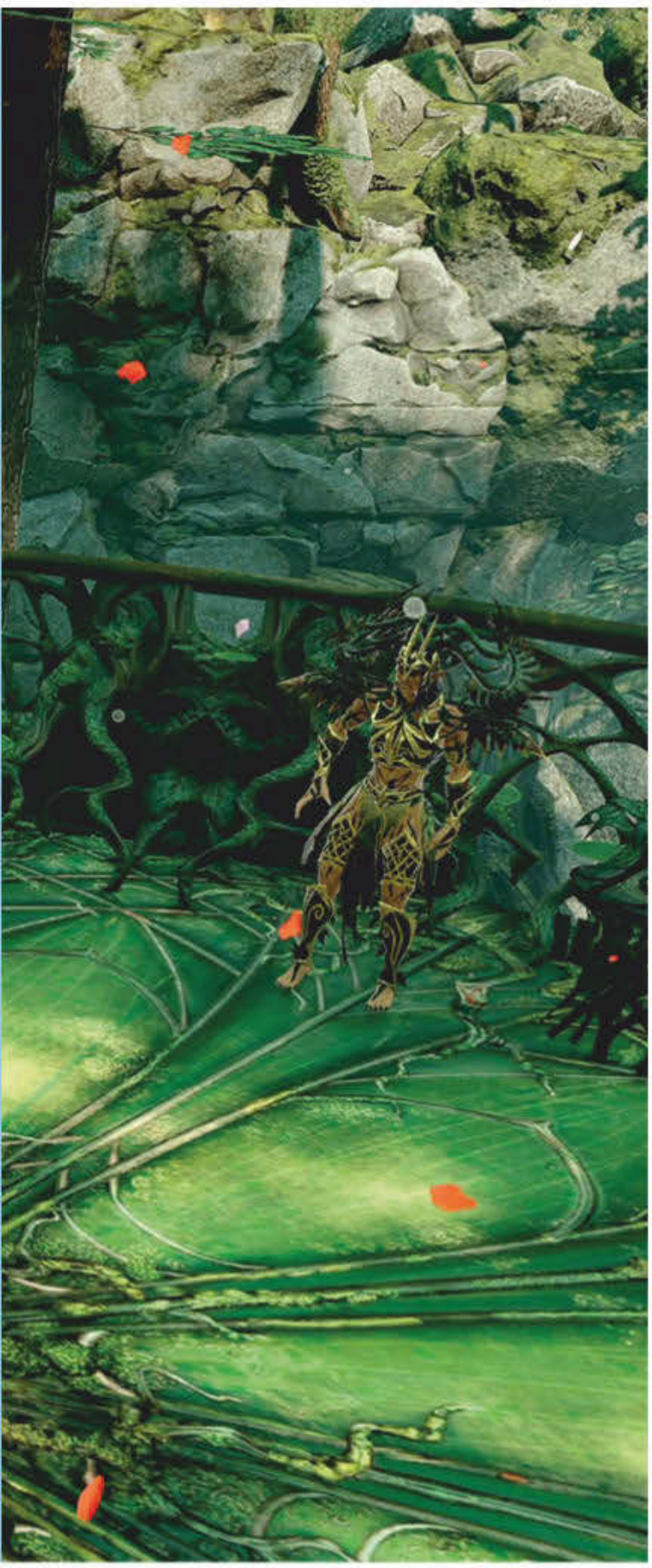
Larian is also making no bones about the fact that Fallen Heroes will be, by design, a challenging game. Like the Infinity Engine RPGs that inspired the Original Sin series,

You can't explore the world freely, but the scale is huge.

Between missions, choices you make steer the story.



Using elemental surfaces is still an important tactic.



you'll need to make intelligent use of your abilities and second-guess the AI to survive a fight. "Frankly, the game has been designed to be quite difficult," says Vincke. "You'll often be left in situations with little HP and only a few units left, so it's quite intense. Even I suffer when I play it, and that's on the normal difficulty setting. You can lower it, of course."

For fans of Original Sin 2, the chance to hang out with the Red Prince, Ifan, Beast, and the rest of the gang will be hard to resist, even if it's not in the form of a typical RPG. "Narratively, it feels really good to see these heroes back," says Vincke. "But this isn't a massive world you're going to go out and explore. There are set missions, and each has its own objectives. But we have tried to maintain the diversity you find in our RPGs. We never want you to do the same thing twice."

Fallen Heroes likely won't be as long as the gargantuan Original Sin 2, but Larian is aiming for a lot of replay value. The path each player takes through the game will be different depending on choices made, the order missions are completed in, and so on. "The critical path through the game is 22 out of 60 missions, which gives you an idea of how many permutations there are," says Vincke. "But it is more contained, with a clearer structure of acts. I think we're offering a higher level of freedom here than you'll find in other tactics games."

DRAMATIC ENTRANCE

Larian is also aiming for a feeling of drama in its battles. "It's a lot more cinematic than Original Sin 2 was," says Vincke. "When you start a mission the camera will move around and show you the action. One of the decisions you have to make is when you find a city under attack by a group called the Bloodless.

"You decide whether you're going to relieve Lucian, which you should do, or save a bunch of people stuck on the harbor trying to escape. If you help Lucian, the camera will show you the city under siege. People falling off buildings, explosions everywhere, characters yelling at each other. It sets the mood."

Surfaces also play a big part in Fallen Heroes' combat — areas of the battlefield with different elemental properties you can exploit. "We added a new type called sulphurium," explains Vincke.

"It's triggered by kinetic energy, and it causes an explosion with a shockwave. So if you shoot a crossbow at it while you're on top of it, you can rocket jump. And if you time it right you can jump across multiple surfaces. If an enemy is nearby they'll be thrown back by the impact as you jump. It's a really cool systemic addition to the combat."

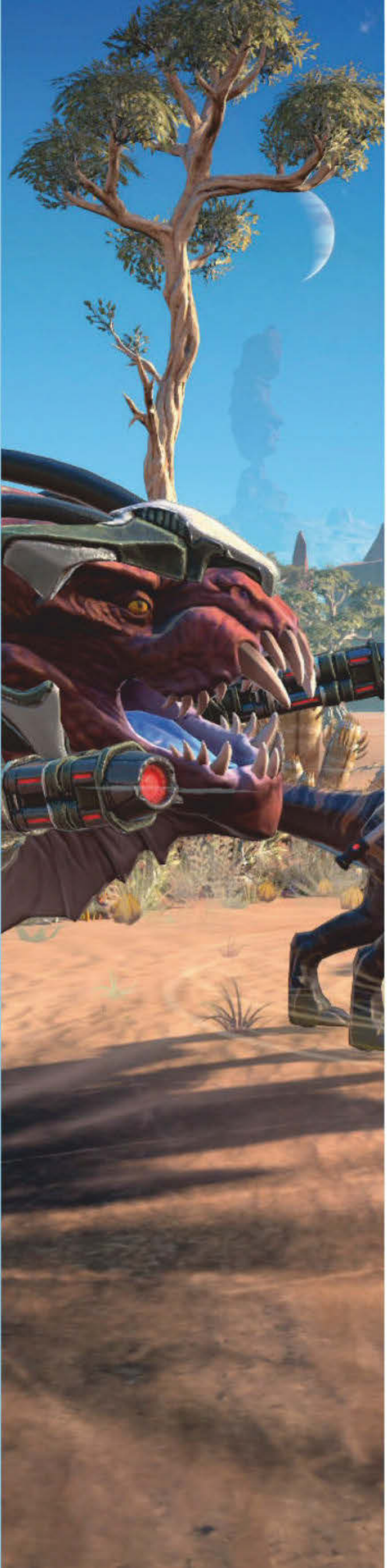
Giving an example of how this new surface can also work against you Vinke says, "Last night when I was playing I used Phoenix Dive to get on a roof where an enemy with a blunderbuss was positioned. I had the intention of killing him with one shot. But it was his turn and he shot me off the roof. I landed on some sulphurium that had spilled out of a barrel, was thrown away, and took double damage. That was the intention of the AI and it felt awesome. It also sucked because I lost my unit. But those are the kinds of combinations you can pull off. And all the surface types from Divinity 2 are in the game.

"Combat-wise, we're giving you a much better toolbox. When you start on a mission, your most important decision is who comes with you.

"This decides which tools you can use on the battlefield. Then you have to decide which consumables and artifacts to take. These starting parameters can make every fight feel different, and can actually decide whether you'll make it through the mission or not. This, plus AI which is capable of adapting to how you play and the surface experimentation, makes it very unpredictable."

Fallen Heroes is not what I expected the next thing from Larian to be, especially after the enormous popularity of the Original Sin games. But it's nice to see the studio attempting something different, and a chance for Original Sin 2 fans to continue the story — albeit in a very different form. The idea of bringing RPG storytelling and choices to a tactics game is an intriguing one, and I can't wait to see if Larian pulls it off. The combat from the Divinity games is a deep well to pull from, and should be a powerful starting point for a squad-based tactics game.

ANDY KELLY PC



DEVELOPER TRIUMPH STUDIOS • **PUBLISHER** PARADOX INTERACTIVET • **RELEASE** AUGUST 6, 2019
www.aow-planetfall.com

Age of Wonders: Planetfall

A weird sci-fi toolbox with strong tactical battles.

Picking a faction in a 4X game usually requires a lot of consideration. But this time I didn't even have to think about it. My options were restricted to Space Dwarves, Space Bugs, Space Americans, or a group of stoic warrior women with an environmentalist streak who ride laser-packing dinosaurs. Was there really any choice?

The Amazons are clearly the best, but I'm probably not giving the rest a fair shake. Every faction has unique units, techs, and a playstyle that makes them all tempting. The insectoid Kir'Ko, for instance, have a penchant for psychic trickery, taking over minds during the turn-based tactical battles. But... laser dinosaurs!

My army of nature-loving warriors was led by Sappho Tori, a premade character that I tweaked only a little bit, providing her a dinosaur mount straight away. Named characters like Sappho are special heroic units that lead armies, annex territory and influence battles with powerful abilities. When they level up, new skills can be unlocked, letting you change them into a legendary sniper or giving them the ability to drive a huge tank.

Before I could send out this mighty army of Amazons and stampeding dinosaurs, I still had one more faction-defining decision to make: What secret technology was I going to pick? These special projects dole out flashy abilities that can be used in combat and on the map, as well as giving you a new path to victory by letting you construct a doomsday weapon. I went with the biological nightmare that is the xenoplague, which, I would quickly discover, is really gross.

In Planetfall, years of isolation have ended, and the various human, post-human, and alien factions of the universe are once again traveling across space, settling on forgotten worlds and competing over territory. Despite the stellar setting, Planetfall is not a space 4X, as each game takes place on a single, randomly generated world. Sappho and her pals landed in an appropriately green sector of the planet, surrounded by flora.

The map is a real treat. It's a randomly-generated jigsaw full of sectors with meandering borders and special traits. The result, at least using the default map settings, is a world that's got diversions and shiny distractions at every turn, egging you on to explore further, but still manages to look coherent. Within a short march from my colony, I found a mighty river of magma, a dead city spread out across an entire sector, and even a civilisation of intelligent fungi.

It didn't take me long to get into trouble. As well as the other factions to contend with, marauding aliens wander the map in search of fights. Like any good tourist, I was heading over to the aforementioned river of magma to soak in the sights, but I was waylaid by a group of angry plants before I could get there.

EXPLOIT WEAKNESSES

Fights take place on a separate tactical map informed by the sector you're in, so I found myself in a dense jungle — the enemy's home turf. Age of Wonders 3's tactical maps were more like conventional Medieval battlefields, broad and flat, but Planetfall's are much more elaborate and put a greater emphasis on cover and line of sight. There's still more than a hint of the older games' combat systems, but the sci-fi conceit and abundance of firearms means that, at times, it's equally evocative of squad-based tactics games like XCOM, though fights are much shorter.

Even with dinosaurs, it pays to take a step back and assess the enemy. I absolutely did not do that, but it's still a great idea. Enemies have various resistances and weaknesses, all handy things to know if you're planning on killing them. Quite a few of my units had more than one ability, thankfully, giving my army a bit of flexibility straight away. If an enemy was weak against melee attacks, I could send my pterodactyl in with its claws. If they were weak against fire, it could shoot lasers instead.

Operations really saved my bacon. These

replace Age of Wonders 3's spells and function pretty similarly. You research new operations and then cast them in battle or on the campaign map, buffing units and colonies while harming enemies. I was rather partial to the good old orbital laser, but my alien plague came in pretty handy, too. It poisons enemies and spawns a horrible little parasite who can join your army after the battle. In only a handful of turns, I already had several fun super weapons to play around with.

For reaching the magma river and surviving a few battles — just — I rewarded my army with an upgrade. Every unit can be augmented with mods, giving them new characteristics and abilities, like a jetpack that makes the unit more mobile in combat. Thanks to the xenoplague secret technology, I was able to research plague pods, giving my units the ability to lob toxic projectiles at enemies.

Leaders can be enhanced even more with weapons, gear, and mounts. For my basic rangers, it was an obvious upgrade, but the mod system appears to be as much about specialising, not just making your units better.

Planetfall seems to have hit the sweet spot when it comes to unit customisation. Instead of making lots of tiny, incremental tweaks, you're adding a small number of mods that can significantly change the unit. It's hard to get excited about a two per cent damage boost, but the ability to fly and a new weapon with lots of handy effects? That's a bit more exciting.

As well as exploring, I was expanding my borders. Expansion in Planetfall is methodical, and instead of growing your borders through influence or culture, you annex sectors, specialising them for things like industry and agriculture, and then exploiting what you find there via your colony. A higher population and additional colonies let you control more sectors and increase your reach. With the Amazon empire growing, it was inevitable that I'd bump into one of the other factions that had made the world its home.

I'd already met the Growth, a plant-based NPC faction. Marauding plants might have beaten me up a few times, but the Growth was actually very friendly. NPC factions are indigenous and aren't competing in the 4X competition. You can wipe them out if you're feeling particularly cruel, but since the Amazons seemed pretty in tune with nature, I opted to help them instead.

NPC factions dole out quests, rewarding you with resources and favor. The latter fuels diplomacy and can be spent on demands, like asking an NPC faction to leave a sector so you can take it over, or buying unique units and mods. In the Growth's fungal city, I purchased some bees, as you do.

This way you're not locked into your faction's army. Through diplomacy and trade, you can field whatever you want. And if you prefer to fight, you can always go and conquer a settlement and use their buildings to make new troops, helpfully shoring up any gaps in your own faction's roster. I only bought those bees, however, and while they were very good bees, they weren't exactly game-changers. Good mascots, though.

TALK IT OUT

Diplomacy between playable factions is pretty familiar. You make pacts, deals, and trade via a diplomacy screen. They're a chatty bunch, always eager to give you a call with an update on your relationship status.

Given there were also wandering packs of NPC aliens looking for a fight, I didn't fancy adding a war on top of that, so our relationships stayed pretty friendly. With more time and colliding borders, I'm sure that would have changed.

I encountered a few visual bugs, and parts of the UI are sorely lacking clarity, but Age of Wonders: Planetfall otherwise makes a very good first impression. Like its predecessor, a lot of the systems serve to prop up the engaging tactical brawls, but it's a broader 4X with more attention given to the empire management and diplomatic side of things. Notably, this doesn't seem to have a negative effect on the pace, at least in the early stage of the game, which moves along briskly despite all the additional distractions.

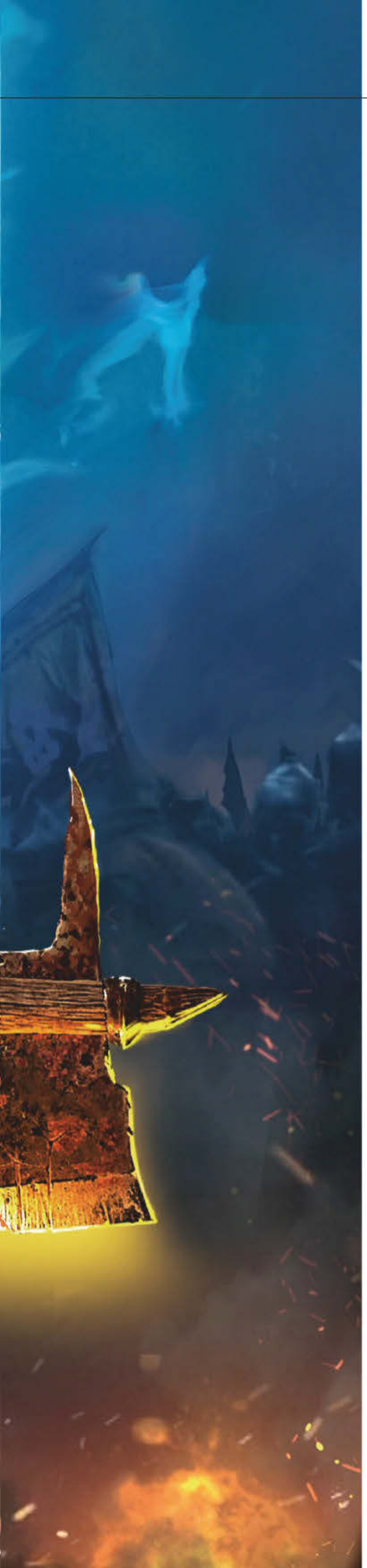
FRASER BROWN PC

Orbital laser strikes are good for the environment.

Every unit can be upgraded, but leaders get the best gear.

Nothing pleasant ever happens near alien nests.

It's a gorgeous map, even when irradiated.



DEVELOPER FATSHARK • **PUBLISHER** FATSHARK • **RELEASE** 2019
www.vermintide.com

Vermintide II: Winds of Magic

The endgame has arrived.

It's easy to get carried away," says CEO Martin Wahlund. "You're proud of the game, you're proud of the reviews, and then suddenly you get scared as well. People are playing it!" After Vermintide II's release, Wahlund found himself reacting to every bug report and complaint. At one point he messaged the team late at night because of an error report that, upon investigation, was down to the player's own internet connection being down.

Some of the game's early patches didn't receive enough testing, causing them to break other parts of the game. "It's such a bad experience for the player," says Wahlund. "If you're playing, and starting a career and using a certain weapon, and we break that weapon or break that career, it's like we ruined it."

"We had some bad experiences in the beginning where we were a bit too eager and released [an update] a bit too early," says Mårten Stormdal, executive producer of Vermintide II. "We didn't have time to test properly, and we got some bad publicity for it. It was right, because we didn't do our work properly, but that has made us a bit more cautious."

"More professional," says Wahlund.

Fatshark slowed down and took stock of where they were and where they wanted to go. "We worked on the infrastructure," says Wahlund. "We needed to think about where we want to be in five years, because we want to build a game that people can play for a long time. We needed to do some organisational change internally and figure out how we handle a game that will live for many years."

Vermintide II's first year has been a learning experience for the small Swedish studio. And while Fatshark made the internal changes needed to secure the game's long term future, its existing playerbase grew impatient for both new content — just five new levels, across two paid-for DLC packs, were released in the game's first year — and the arrival of systems promised before the game's launch.

Now, though, Fatshark is in a place where it feels ready to cater to that demand. The first stage of this new phase of Vermintide II's life was the introduction of weekly challenges — added in an update released last month. The system is based on the concept of mutators — special rulesets that change the way you play, and sometimes even new versions of existing levels. On March 8, the date of the game's anniversary, players will be treated to a special challenge that sees Vermintide's heroes embark on a tour of nearby inns, looking for ale.

As they drink and have slurred conversations — Kerillian has decided that everyone should call her queen — they gain a buff to their attack. But if they go too long without a swig of ale, they become hungover. Drink too much, and they fall over. It's a fun celebration of everything Vermintide II does well: the combat, the joking, and even the lore, with Games Workshop stepping in to name the inns you visit.

Weekly challenges aren't just there to add variety, but also to give players something to work towards. While not available yet, the ultimate aim is for challenges to award a new in-game currency that players can use to buy specific cosmetic items for their characters. "It's something people have been poking us for since launch," says Wahlund.

Both the cosmetic shop and the collectible paintings — also added with the weekly challenge update — are ways for players to work towards a specific goal. But if your ambitions go beyond some fancy hats and nice pictures, Fatshark has a plan for you too. This year's biggest addition will take place this summer, with the release of Vermintide II's first expansion, Winds of Magic.

The expansion will add a new enemy race,

new difficulty, and new weapons. At its heart, though, Winds of Magic is designed around one big idea: to give players an endless gauntlet of progressively more difficult challenges. "The basics of the expansion is to provide an endgame." says Wahlund.

Winds of Magic will likely offer an introductory story mission, but new adventure maps aren't the focus. Rather, the main progression path for the expansion is a new mode. "I think the most similar game mode would be the Greater Rifts that Diablo III has," says Wahlund, "where you go in and they scale in difficulty. We're not doing the same thing, though. We're doing it in our own way."

IT'S MAGIC

"The idea behind the Winds is they're going to change the look and overall feel of the level completely," says programmer Tom Batsford. "Each Wind should look very different from each other, even on the same level, and also give a mutator." Fatshark is still figuring out which mutators should be tied to each Wind, but the prototypes I'm shown seem designed to offer both positive and negative modifiers. The Life Wind, for instance, currently grants constant health regeneration, but causes players to lose health whenever they hit an enemy.

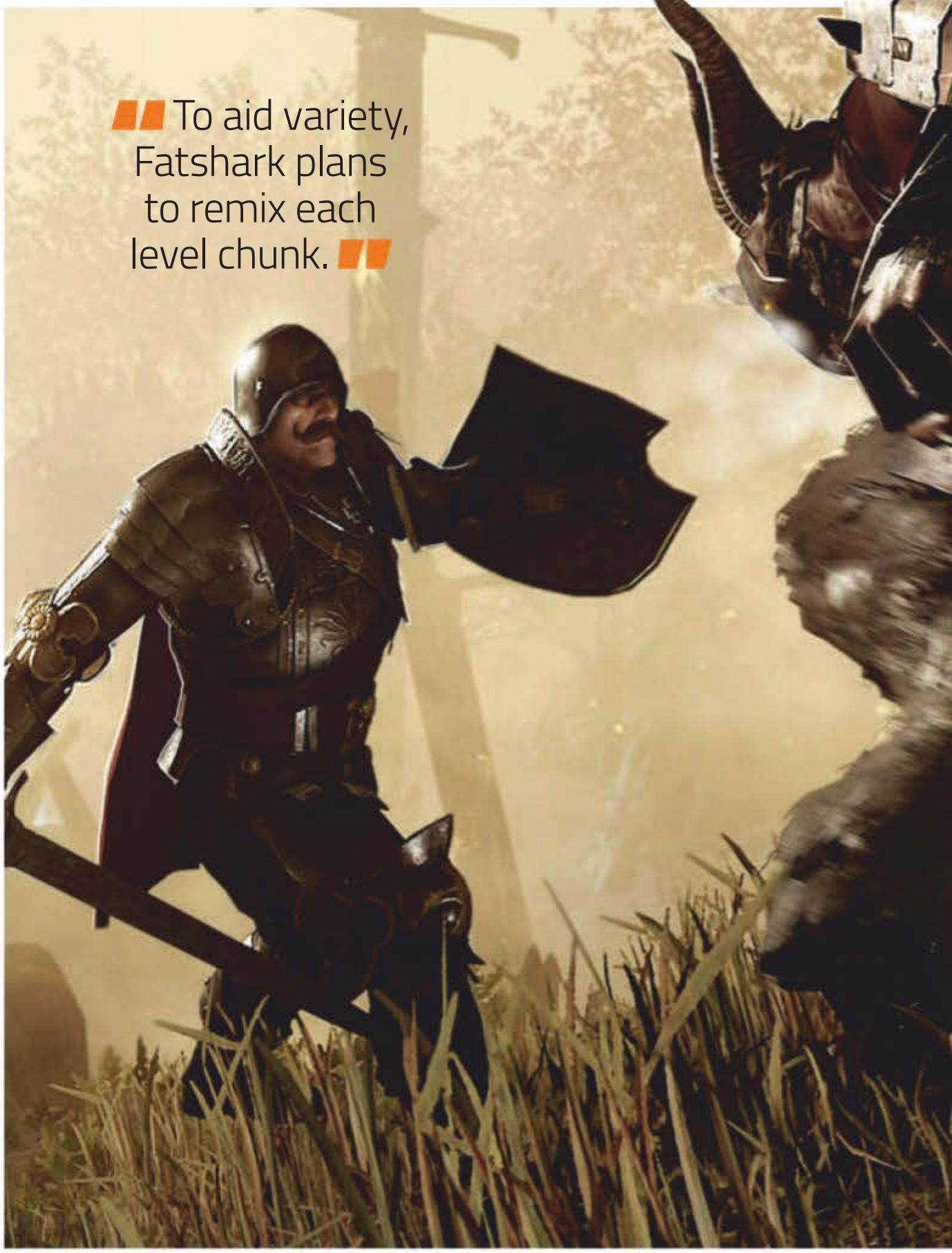
To aid variety, Fatshark plans to remix each level chunk. As an example, I'm shown a Weave that takes place on a section of Against the Grain, but played in reverse. To finish a Weave, players will be required to complete an objective, like killing enough enemies to fill a progress bar, slaying a certain number of a specific enemy, or capturing objectives. "The objectives we have, we want them to be different," says Batsford. "We want them to be a different way to play the game rather than just going from A to B and killing stuff... just different ways to play each time."

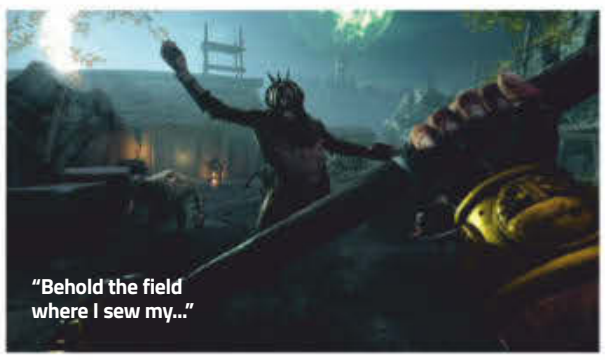
Once the objective is completed, a portal will open that will take players to an arena where they'll need to complete a final event. "Right now we have one that is like survive waves [of enemies]," says Batsford. "Another one we have is where two bosses spawn and you have to defeat both of them. And the Wind mutator is in effect."

As players progress to higher Weaves, the difficulty will continue to increase. "We have continually scaling difficulty that goes way beyond the highest difficulty that we have in the game," says Batsford. "We don't want people to ever reach a cap on this. The cap will rather be when it gets just too hard for them to do it." While the first few Weaves will be fun, easy introductions to the modifiers, later ones will be harsher — providing less regen on Life Wind levels, for instance.

WEAVING A SPELL

One of the key ways Winds of Magic's new mode will differ from Diablo III's Greater Rifts is that Weaves won't be randomised. Everyone will be playing the same set of




"Behold the field where I sew my..."

The beastmen are a fierce new foe.

Weaves, meaning that players can work to find solutions to specific problems. More than just a combat challenge, Fatshark wants Weaves to feel like puzzles — challenging players to experiment with different weapon sets and career compositions. "People can then share that on forums, Reddit, whatever," says Batsford. "I think if we can nail that it's going to work out really nicely."

Another benefit of having predetermined Weaves is it lets Fatshark add leaderboards. "You're going to get a score while you play these," explains Batsford, "and your score is going to be based on how long it took you to complete it, and then also how much damage you took. So you might have [a Weave] where the best way to get score is to do it slowly but make sure you don't take much damage, or you might have one where you speedrun it and it doesn't matter how much damage you take."

Fatshark is also planning a leaderboard that tracks how many Weaves you've completed. Thanks to the difficulty scaling, the gauntlet can be essentially infinite.

"Each of these Weaves is going to be hand tailored because we're removing the randomness from them," says Batsford. "We're going to need to set spawns for these and make sure they work for each one. But we're obviously not going to be able to do that endlessly. So we need to do that for a set amount, and then we'll probably repeat them with a higher difficulty."

I'm intrigued, and Fatshark is doing some cool things with the look of the Weaves. Metal stages are a bathed in rusty yellow. Veins of ore grow like tree roots, and fields of giant swords appear off in the background. "The one I'm looking forward to the most is Fire," says Batsford, "because the idea right now is to get it so you can feel like you're walking through a forest fire. So it's like everything is burning, the sky is on fire, ash everywhere. It's the perfect excuse to get some Sienna voice lines going. She's loving it."

The key for Fatshark, I feel, will be nailing the mutators for each Wind — ensuring that each is fun to tackle and scales clearly — and offering a wide enough variety of objectives and scenarios. Something that may help, and that the team is currently considering as a possibility, is making the Weaves seasonal. That could potentially lead to new mutators being added, as well as a reshuffling of the order so that players get to experience Weaves they couldn't previously reach.

Fatshark aims to shake up the base game as well. As you'll have noticed, Winds of Magic is bringing Beastmen to the game. "We have this duality," says Mats Andersson, head of Vermintide II's action team. "We have a lot of players who are into it because of the feeling, lore, and immersion, so the Beastmen are a huge part of that, because they're cool and scary, and it's cool to play against them. Then we have that other set of challenge-based players, who go in-depth to master the combat loop. We want the Beastmen to target both of those types — similar to what we're doing with the Winds of Magic mode."

The bulk of the Beastman force will be made up of Gors — the grunts analogous to the Skaven's Clanrats or Rotblood's Raiders. But it's the secondary units that make the Beastmen such interesting enemies. Smaller Ungors will rush players in great numbers — similar to the Skavenslaves — but will also fight in conjunction with Gors. "The thing we're experimenting with now is adding Ungors that use spears," says Andersson, "so we get enemies with a bit more distance … you can have that thing where you're swinging the weapon and it's kind of nice, and all of a sudden I have guys that keep a bit more distance. I'm swinging my weapon and I'm not hitting it."

THROWING DOWN

Kerillian's new sword and spear combo is designed with the Handmaiden career in mind, and swaps out her traditional glass cannon play style in favor of a more robust frontline role. Sienna is being given a flaming flail, because, in Andersson's words, "it's awesome". The most interesting new weapon, however, belongs to Bardin. "Basically Bardin needs ranged weapons, and I want to experiment with throwing weapons," says Andersson. "So this is going to be the base blueprint for throwing stuff."

To an extent, it feels like Fatshark is taking a risk with Winds of Magic. The one thing they're not planning is a big library of new maps. Rather, this is an expansion designed to flesh out the Vermintide II experience in new directions — adding new ways to play with a potentially endless challenge. And it's just the beginning, too. During my visit, I'm shown the early workings of something that Fatshark isn't yet ready to announce. Winds of Magic may bring an endgame, but it's just the beginning. *PHIL SAVAGE* PC

OVERCOME A CHALLENGE
COMPETE AGAINST FRIENDS
SOLVE A PUZZLE
ENJOY A STORYV
EXPLORE A WORLD
JUMP FROM FRIGHT
SEE SOMETHING DIFFERENT
ROAR WITH LAUGHTER
RELIVE THE PAST
The Top
50
FREE
GAMES
Our favorite freeware delights
By Phil Savage, Andy Kelly, & Tom Sykes

I WANT TO... RELIVE THE PAST

COMMAND & CONQUER: RED ALERT

cncnet.org/red-alert

Westwood's alternate history spin-off is still a great RTS, and one of a number of classics in the genre available for free. Visit CNCNet and you'll find downloads of Command & Conquer, Red Alert and Tiberian Sun, all updated to work nicely on modern systems and integrated with the CnCNet multiplayer platform for easy online play. If that isn't enough to sate your RTS desires, the brilliant Twisted Insurrection — available from the same site — is a total conversion of Tiberian Sun, available standalone. And, for fans of Westwood's main competitor, Battle.net lets you download StarCraft for free. *PS*

THE ELDER SCROLLS II: DAGGERFALL

bit.ly/daggerfall-free

The second Elder Scrolls game is a glimpse of Tamriel before its modern incarnations in Oblivion and Skyrim. This absolutely enormous RPG is literally the size of Great Britain, although the primitive 3D visuals haven't aged terribly well. Still, this is a big old adventure, with a lot of features that would go on to define the series. *AK*

OPENTTD

openttd.org

Transport Tycoon was the ultimate dad game. That's not to say that all dads enjoyed it, or that you had to be a dad in order to play. Rather, it embodied the metaphysical state of mid-90s suburban dadness in that specific way that only a game about constructing a sprawling transportation empire can achieve. *PS*

THE DARK MOD

thedarkmod.com

The Dark Mod is a standalone platform for user-made Thief missions. It's easy to install new maps, meaning the hardest part is deciding what to play. Highlights include The Tears of St Lucia, Briarwood Manor, Full Moon Fever, and the multipart William Steele series. PS

MARATHON

alephone.lhowon.org

The 90s wasn't a great time to be an Apple fan, but at least Mac owners got the Marathon trilogy. Slower and more deliberate than Doom, and with an emphasis on story and labyrinthine levels, the full trilogy can now be played, for free, on Windows, Mac, and Linux. PS

ULTIMA IV: QUEST OF THE AVATAR

bit.ly/ultimafree

Ultima IV may look like a simple RPG, but its twist on fantasy storytelling is one of the reasons the series is still so fondly remembered. There's no big evil to overthrow—rather, this is a story about becoming a better person by embodying the Eight Virtues. PS

SPELUNKY CLASSIC

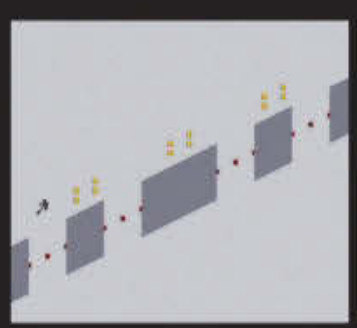
bit.ly/spelunkpc

■ Derek Yu's relentless, fiendishly addictive roguelike platformer is still enormously playable, whether it's the 2013 enhanced version or this, the free original. You play as a spelunker exploring a series of procedurally generated caverns, and the deeper you delve the more dangerous things get. These caves are filled with things that want you dead including spike traps, skeletons, snakes, and other nasties. To survive, and make it to the darkest depths of the cave, you need a lot of skill and a lot of patience. You'll die, a lot, in your first few runs. But with every attempt you get a little deeper, making it endlessly replayable. *AK*

BROGUE

bit.ly/broguepc

■ In many ways Brogue is an uncompromising, traditional roguelike, right down to the ASCII graphics. But its clever use of shading also makes it one of the most readable, turning a screen of text into an atmospheric map. It's easy to pick up and play, letting you get straight down to enjoying its surprising, procedurally generated adventures. *PS*



N V2.0

bit.ly/n2free

You're a ninja, navigating through featureless gray rooms full of gold and traps. Collect the gold, avoid the traps, and slowly become a master of momentum. The floaty jumping is perfectly tuned for keyboard precision, and ensures that N v2.0 feels like no other platformer. PS

DWARF FORTRESS

bit.ly/dwarfpc

One of the most ambitious and generous free games around. Dwarf Fortress is a society simulator, generating a world, history, and nuanced characters. You build a home for your dwarfs, and try to secure their survival. It rarely goes smoothly, but remember: Losing is fun. PS

HYPERROGUE

bit.ly/hrogue

While the concept is mildly terrifying, in practise this is one of the more approachable roguelikes, as it streamlines the genre to focus on movement and combat. You're hopping around a mathematically tricksy sphere here, far bigger than its surface area, and encompassing wildly differing geographical regions. TS

HETS

ditto.itch.io/hets

■ Spelunky meets Contra in this murderous platform game where you explore one randomly generated level after another. Right away you'll be grabbed by the impressive lighting effects. But you'll stick around for the guns, which push you back with their hefty recoil, shake the screen and turn enemies into pixel confetti. *TS*

XONOTIC

xonotic.org

■ If, like me, you long for a break from the battle passes and season ladders that make up today's online shooters, Xonotic offers a welcome respite. Its server browser promises a wealth of ways to engage in frenetic battle thanks to a vast mix of modes, maps, and mutators. Whichever server you pick, Xonotic offers rock solid gunplay and a quick pace that harks back to the speed and style of Quake III Arena. It's fast, fun, and incredibly easy to pick up and play. If you're looking for a purer, more competitive arena shooter, check out Warsow, which is also available for free. *PS*

EGGNOG+

madgarden.itch.io/eggnogg

■ Heavily inspired by Nidhogg, parody game Eggnog is now a much-loved local multiplayer game in its own right, with a subtly different moveset. You're trying to get to one end of the world, while your opponent attempts to reach the other. Stopping them will require much acrobatic slashing and wildly dangerous sword-chucking. *TS*

ZERO-K

zero-k.info

■ This real-time strategy game, which has earned itself a dedicated cult following, features terrain deformation and battles on a truly massive scale. Reminiscent of games such as Total Annihilation and Supreme Commander, Zero-K sees you commanding a robot army to take control of large maps. *AK*

SLITHER.IO

slither.io

In this massively multiplayer mashup of Snake and Agar.io, players eat glowing pellets to grow their worm as long as they can. You need to avoid hitting other players, while trying to make them hit you — quickly darting in front of them in the hope of forcing an error.

THE BATTLE FOR WESNOTH

wesnoth.org

This is a huge turn-based tactical RPG — think Fire Emblem, but bigger and more complex. First released in 2003, it now offers a staggering 17 singleplayer campaigns and over 50 multiplayer maps. Should you make it through all that, there's community created content too. PS

I WANT TO...
SEE SOMETHING DIFFFERENT

EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE OK

bit.ly/okfreepc

Nathalie Lawhead's games are like nothing else out there: Wiry, multimedia experiences where cuteness and harshness are not considered mutually exclusive terms. Everything is Going to be OK is an 'interactive zine' — where a bevy of cute creatures struggle with life. TS

BLUES FOR MITTAVINDA

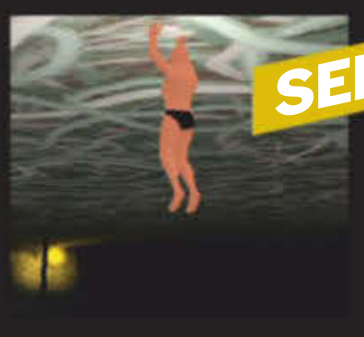
bit.ly/mittavinda

Bues for Mittavinda is one of the slower, more restrained games found in Jack King-Spooner's catalogue of unfiltered delights. It transports you to a handsomely modelled, claymation take on the old west. Take your time exploring this one. TS

CRYPT WORLDS

bit.ly/cryptpc

A bizarre first-person adventure that feels like a glitched-out PS1 game, or Ultima Underworld if it had been corrupted by 100 malware programs. It's an incoherent, overwhelmingly odd archaeology game containing countless moments that will make you laugh, think, and scratch your head, often simultaneously. TS



MUSCLE WORLD

bit.ly/musclepc

Taking inspiration from From Software's King's Field series, Muscle World nails those games' dread-laden atmosphere. However it's not a medieval RPG, but a surreal survival horror where you play as a bodybuilder crawling across the ceiling of a cavernous dungeon. TS

0_ABYSSAL SOMEWHERE

bit.ly/abysspc

Techno-horror meets survival horror in this third-person adventure set in a void-like environment. Don't expect clear answers, as you explore and battle ghostlike enemies, but do expect to stop to gawk at the game's truly alien world. TS

CUBE ESCAPE SERIES

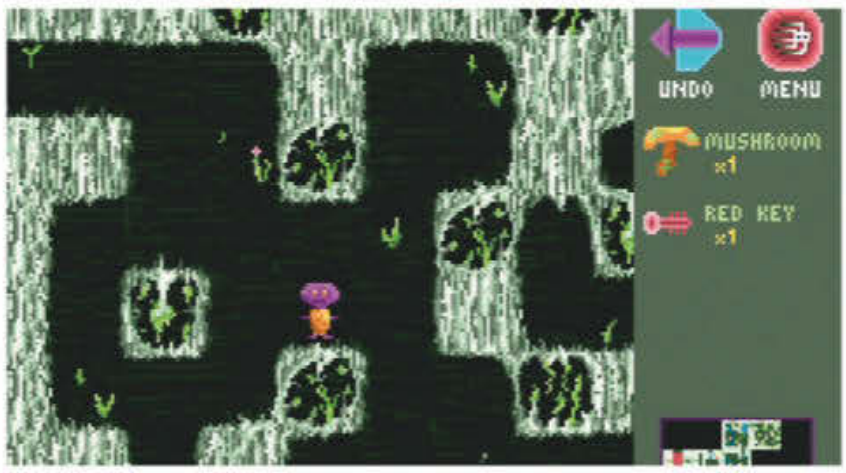
cubeescape.com

■ For the past few years, developer Rusty Lake has been rapidly expanding the surreal universe that shares its name. There are the Rusty Lake games — bigger puzzle titles that come with a price tag — and the shorter Cube Escape series, which hurtle the player from one strange locked room to another. They're basically room escapes, but with a macabre sense of humor, a touch of Lynchian weirdness, and cryptic stories that have inspired much fan debate. It's an inspired concoction, with challenging puzzles and an absorbing atmosphere. Lynchian stuff is already puzzling, so why not throw some actual puzzles in there too? *TS*

SKIPPING STONES TO LONELY HOMES

bit.ly/skippingpc

■ PuzzleScript is a brilliant tool, allowing people to easily create Sokoban-style games such as Alan Hazelden's Skipping Stones. It's an open-ended puzzler that asks you to cross a series of islands, using only stones and lily pads. Stones can be skipped along water, while lily pads can be shunted aside. The result is a devious puzzler. *TS*



CORRYPT

smestorp.itch.io/corrypt

■ Michael Brough's Corrypt isn't quite what it appears, your first clue being the name 'Michael Brough'. His games always surprise. Corrypt is a block-pushing game where you end up changing the nature of its world. The best puzzle games leave you open-mouthed at their ingenuity. Corrypt will leave your chin resting on your keyboard. *TS*

ENDING

bit.ly/endingpc

Everything is predictable in Ending, a minimalist puzzle game that behaves a lot like a traditional, turn-based roguelike. Mastering each clockwork level will require plenty of deaths and restarts, but you're rewarded for your persistence with a steady drip-feed of inventive new mechanics. TS

COUNTERFEIT MONKEY

bit.ly/monkeyif

In a game made out of text, what happens when you're given a tool that can remove letters from words, creating new ones in the process? Lots of playful experimentation, in this expansive interactive puzzle adventure that invites you to rewrite its very world. TS

I WANT TO... SEE SOMETHING DIFFFERENT

CRY OF FEAR

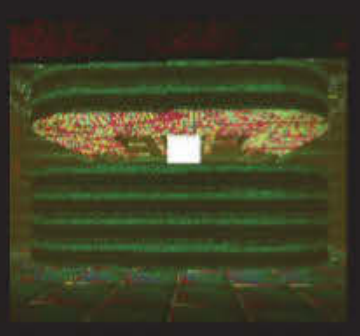
bit.ly/cryfear

Built on the shambling bones of the Half-Life 1 engine, Cry of Fear is at times an FPS, at other times a survival horror and puzzle game, and at all times a cinematically minded experience clearly inspired by the game it's built upon. TS

BAD DREAM: SERIES

bit.ly/badfree

Bad Dream is all about clicking. Being a point and click adventure series, that might seem obvious, but rarely is clicking on things as satisfying as it is in these macabre games. You'll use the mouse to make bugs slither out of plant potsand other gruesome actions. TS



KNOSSU

bit.ly/knossupc

Knossu reinvents the labyrinth as a glitchy digital maze, patrolled by a creature more terrifying than any minotaur. As you explore this non-euclidean labyrinth, with its eerily rippling walls and clever one-way portals, you'll come face-to-mass-of-swirling-pixels with an invisible creature that seems to be rending the very fabric of the world. TS

FAITH

bit.ly/faithpc

A retro-styled horror that puts you in the role of a priest, with the power to banish demons with his trusty crucifix. Although this looks like a C64 game, it thankfully feels more modern, with some genuinely frightening moments that go beyond the game's apparent limitations. TS

TOTAL CHAOS

bit.ly/chaosmod

A stunning Doom 2 mod that barely resembles the game it's built on, surely due to magic or a pact with Beelzebub or some other higher demon. In this ammo-scarce FPS where the 's' stands for shoveller, you'll spend a lot of time battering hideous monsters to death with melee weapons. TS

I WANT TO...
ENJOY A STORY

The Top 50 FREE GAMES

DELTARUNE: CHAPTER 1

deltarune.com

■ Who knows where Undertale follow-up Deltarune is heading for its second chapter, but this multi-hour RPG already feels like a complete game, taking the player from their school, to a troubled fantasy land and back again. There are subtle improvements over Undertale, including more detailed pixel art and the addition of battle companions, but the core experience will be familiar if you've already saved or slaughtered the world of the original game. Thankfully that core is fantastic with the heroes and villains of Deltarune going on surprising journeys in this hilarious, at times moving RPG. *TS*

BUTTERFLY SOUP

brianna-lei.itch.io/butterfly-soup

■ Dialogue is the heart of any visual novel, and it's impressive just how much character Brianna Lei has crammed into Butterfly Soup. It's a game about gay romance in an all-women's baseball club, but really it's a game about its cast, which bursts onto the screen with a vividness uncommon in, well, the majority of video games. *TS*

SPIDER AND WEB

bit.ly/spiderpc

Mixing flashbacks with interrogation sequences, and making great use of text's slippery nature, it's not hard to see why Spider and Web is one of the most celebrated works of interactive fiction. That 'interactive' part isn't for show: This is a Cold-War-era spy story shaped by you. TS

HEROINE'S QUEST

bit.ly/questpc

This is a heartfelt love letter to the Quest for Glory series, but set in a new fantasy world inspired by Norse mythology. Naturally you'll still fight, sneak, or magic your way through point-and-click problems, in this massive, beautiful game that was somehow released for free. TS

BIRDLAND

birdland.camp

Plenty of games feature teenagers, but the summer-camp-set Birdland is the rare game that convincingly gives them a voice. It's a mystery, and a romance title, but above all Birdland is a compelling story, with some of the most natural dialogue you'll find in any game. TS

LIEVE OMA

vltmn.itch.io/lieve-oma

■ Go for a quiet walk with Grandma in the sweet Lieve Oma, a story that captures the spirit of autumn. Crunching leaves underfoot in search of edible mushrooms, the teenage protagonist slowly begins to open up to their grandmother. Most game stories ask you to do dramatic things, but this focuses on a small moment in time. *TS*

THESE MONSTERS

bit.ly/thesemonsters

■ This feels like a good introduction to the developer's refreshingly colorful, abstract environments. Previous games took you to alien art exhibits, and procedurally generated galleries, while These Monsters' artistically minded world takes the form of an imposing museum. In each room there is a TV, or several of them, showing vaguely sinister warning messages on a loop. It's only when you leave the rooms that you realize you've been taken somewhere new, as its dizzyingly recursive world displaces the player every time they pass through a door. Good luck finding your way around this brilliantly disjointed museum. *TS*

HAUNTED CITIES

bit.ly/hauntedpc

■ Explore a range of unsettling, fantastical worlds in Kitty Horrorshow's Haunted Cities series. The environments include apocalyptic cities and messed-up fantasy worlds, and look convincingly like 3D games from the mid-90s. With no combat to worry about, it's a joy just to explore these ambiguous spaces. *TS*

OFF-PEAK

bit.ly/offpeakpc

■ A jazzy explore-'em-up that captures many of the best parts of immersive sims. There's no fighting or sneaking here, but there are plenty of NPCs to chat to, and stuff to interact with. Exploration is only meaningful if there are worthwhile things to find, and Off-Peak is crammed to the rafters with interesting sights. *TS*

A MUSEUM OF DUBIOUS SPLENDORS

bit.ly/2UHX3VS

This pairs short passages from the work of (fictional) poet Mir UmarHassan with everyday objects that hang, giant and unnatural, in the titular museum. It's beautiful and haunting, and forms part of Studio Oleomingus' larger narrative project, Somewhere. PS

BIRTHPLACE OF OSSIAN

bit.ly/ossianpc

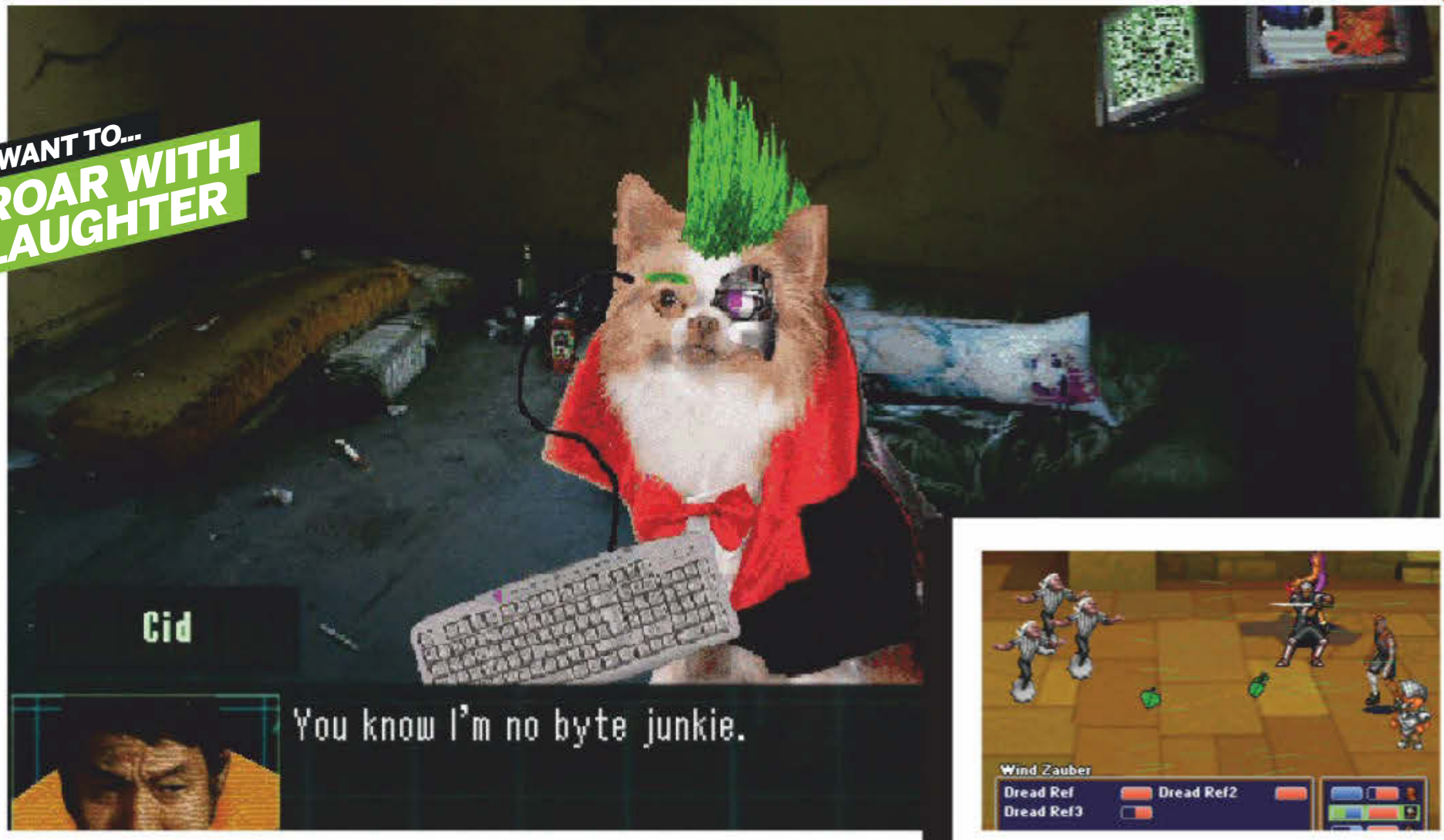
You can almost feel the wind on your neck as you roam the acres of terrain open to you in Connor Sherlock's hilly traversal game. Traipse from one ancient monolith site to another, as gorgeous synth music imbues the rugged landscape with meaning. TS

BERNBAND

bit.ly/bernbandpc

There's no combat, complicated puzzles, or rich story to discover in Bernband. Featuring weird, stylish pixelated visuals, you explore an alien city, mingling with crowds in nightclubs, and soaking in the strange atmosphere. A difficult game to pin down, but one worth sampling. TS

I WANT TO...
ROAR WITH LAUGHTER



DOG OF DRACULA 2

bit.ly/draculapc

■ "Years ago we defeated the Nachrehzer and his ban on condiments that devastated the world, but life only got worse," deadpans Dog of Dracula 2's intro. This is a bleak dystopia of dogs, groomers and cyberbahn addicts. You play as Cid, a "homicidal otaku weapon", trying to drown out the pain of life by overindulging in durststep and sauce. Full of references to anime and 90s consumerism, Dog of Dracula 2 combines cyberpunk absurdism and noir fiction to great effect, resulting in memorably weird lines. "She owns that onesie in a way that spells trouble in capital keypresses." *PS*

BARKLEY, SHUT UP & JAM GAIDEN

bit.ly/barkleypc

■ This tongue-in-cheek Final Fantasy-inspired RPG is set in a 'post-cyberpocalyptic' New York City and stars ex-NBA star Charles Barkley. After performing a devastating 'chaos dunk' during a match, Barkley finds himself in a world where basketball is outlawed. This is a genuinely hilarious, deeply weird game, and no, you don't have to be into basketball to enjoy it. *AK*

DR LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD

bit.ly/langeskov

Dr Langeskov promises to be an exciting heist game. Unfortunately most of the staff have gone on strike and there's another player in the game right now. Maybe you could help out behind the scenes ? PS

RADIATOR 2

bit.ly/radiatorpc

Robert Yang's second trilogy of shortform narrative experiments about intimacy is lighter in tone than Half-Life 2 mod collection Radiator — Stick Shift, as its description explains, "is an autoerotic night-driving game about pleasuring a gay car"— but it still has lots to say about eroticism and consent. PS

COOKIE CLICKER

bit.ly/clickpc

This was coded in one night by creator Julien Thiennot, and has developed a cult following. As the name suggests, your goal is to create cookies by, er, clicking on a cookie. But then you can improve the efficiency of your clicks, and automate them, generating billions of cookies. AK

MURDER DOG IV: TRIAL OF THE MURDER DOG

bit.ly/murderdog

■ Murder Dog — aka Crime Pooch, aka Slaughter Pup — is on trial at the Hague for crimes that he definitely did commit. Entitled to a trial, it's up to Murder Dog to refute evidence, browbeat witnesses, and just generally make a mockery of the legal system in the hope of forcing the jury to declare you not guilty. *PS*

Games 276

YOUR GUIDE TO THE LATEST PC GAMES.

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SCORING SYSTEM

PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 10 scale. The higher, the better – though 10 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 10 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 5 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

POWERED BY
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

The Division 2

An hour-eating and frequently thrilling excursion into Washington DC.

DEVELOPER UBISOFT MASSIVE • **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
www.tomclancy-thedivision.ubisoft.com

After 25 hours of wrestling with BioWare's looter shooter Anthem, it's funny how grateful I am for the little things in The Division 2—stuff like being able to switch my loadout on the fly, without exiting a mission or sitting through a loading screen. No one's tried to make me and three other players sit through a boring mid-mission cutscene, either. In fact, The Division 2 barely makes me pay attention to its barely-there story at all.

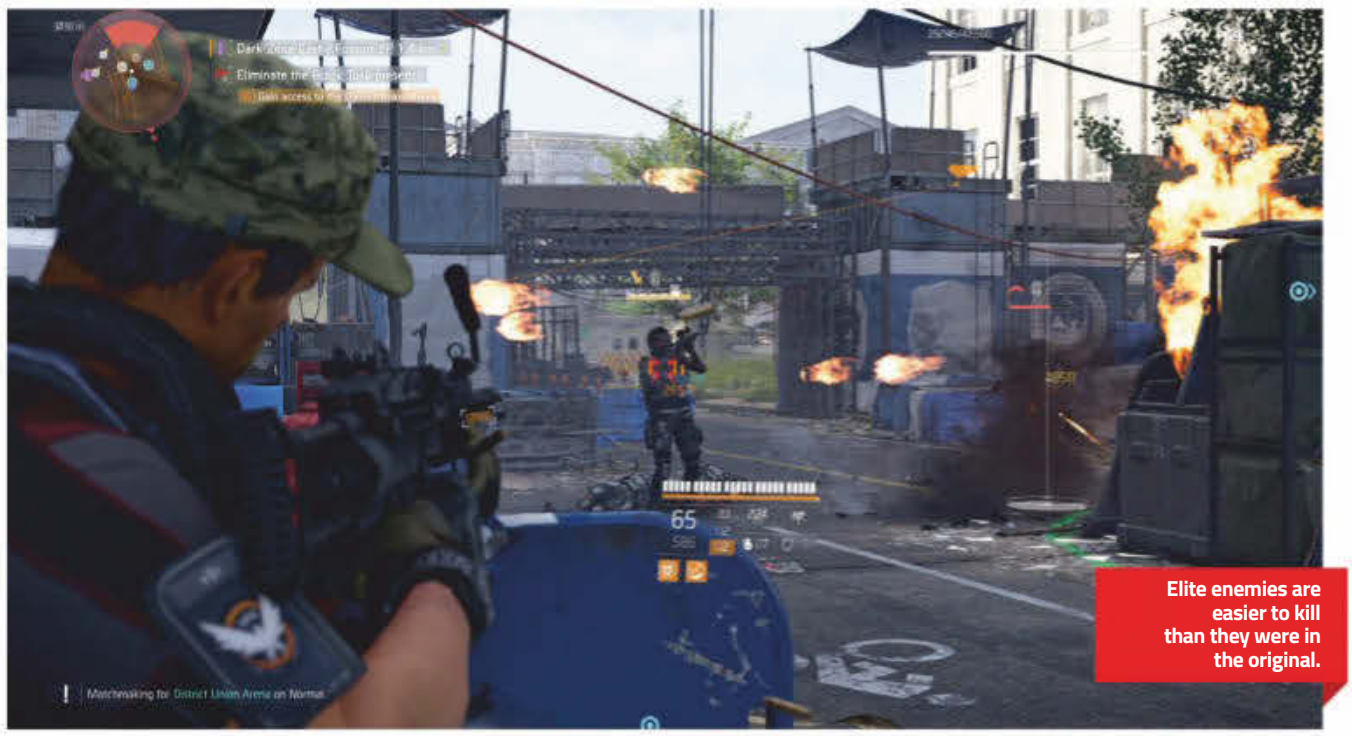
The Division 2 presents a much stronger campaign experience than the first game, with fewer filler missions, and better open world side activities. Its endgame, too, is a satisfyingly different offering to the preceding hours, remixing levels, making the world feel more alive, and escalating the difficulty of side activities to keep you playing. I will say this, if The Division didn't grab you at any point during the past two years of well-considered updates, I don't think this will necessarily be the right game for you now.

It's largely a superior version of the same thing — tough third-person co-op shootouts, interlocking player skills, incremental loot rewards, and a familiarly dry Tom Clancy military tone.

Where it improves is in the cadence of its rewards, pelting you with loot and experience points from various sources, and making the next upgrade feel like a natural result of your journey through the game rather than being arduously earned. If you're looking for a strong looter shooter you can enjoy with friends in the wake of Anthem's troubled launch, or you want a mid-season break from Destiny 2, this will likely be a strong fit.

It helps that the main mission design is mostly terrific, taking you through a variety of real-world tourist spots for shootouts with the game's three enemy factions: The Hyenas, True Sons, and Outcasts, all of which behave a bit differently in combat.

Enemies don't feel as bullet-hungry as they did in the first game, and some of the elite enemies — whose armor is peeled off with gunfire — are genuinely fun to fight. It's a mostly great shooter, let down by the occasional AI issue, where an enemy will get stuck on the spot, or spend so long climbing around that you can easily pick them off.



Elite enemies are easier to kill than they were in the original.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You want a deeper campaign
+ You really, really miss Tom Clancy
+ You live for that next weapon upgrade.

Each main campaign mission feels like a real event. Given that no one really makes linear third-person shooter games now — here they're isolated parts of a massive open world looter game — it's easy to forget what these kind of levels feel like when they're designed well.

EXPLODING HISTORY

There's an amazing excursion into the American History Museum, where there's a (probably tasteless) firefight in the midst of a Vietnam recreation exhibit, complete with royalty-free version of The End by The Doors playing in the background. And then there's a gunfight in the Air & Space Museum's planetarium and Mars exhibits, which for a few minutes make you feel like you're playing a sci-fi shooter.

As someone who's never visited the city in real life, Washington DC isn't as immediately recognisable as the first game's New York, barring a few obvious landmarks.

It undoubtedly feels more alive than the first game's world, though, with plenty of friendly NPCs breaking into firefights with the various enemy factions. It can be exciting to arrive halfway through a battle to turn the cause in your side's favor, bravely shooting enemies in the back while they're distracted by your allies.

DC is also beautiful in places. The weather effects and day/night cycles contribute so much to the game's atmosphere, with the world looking almost entirely different when covered in rainfall, and the odd thunderstorm making firefights particularly dramatic.

It helps that many of the activities dotted around DC's map are genuinely good, particularly control points, which you liberate from enemy factions with

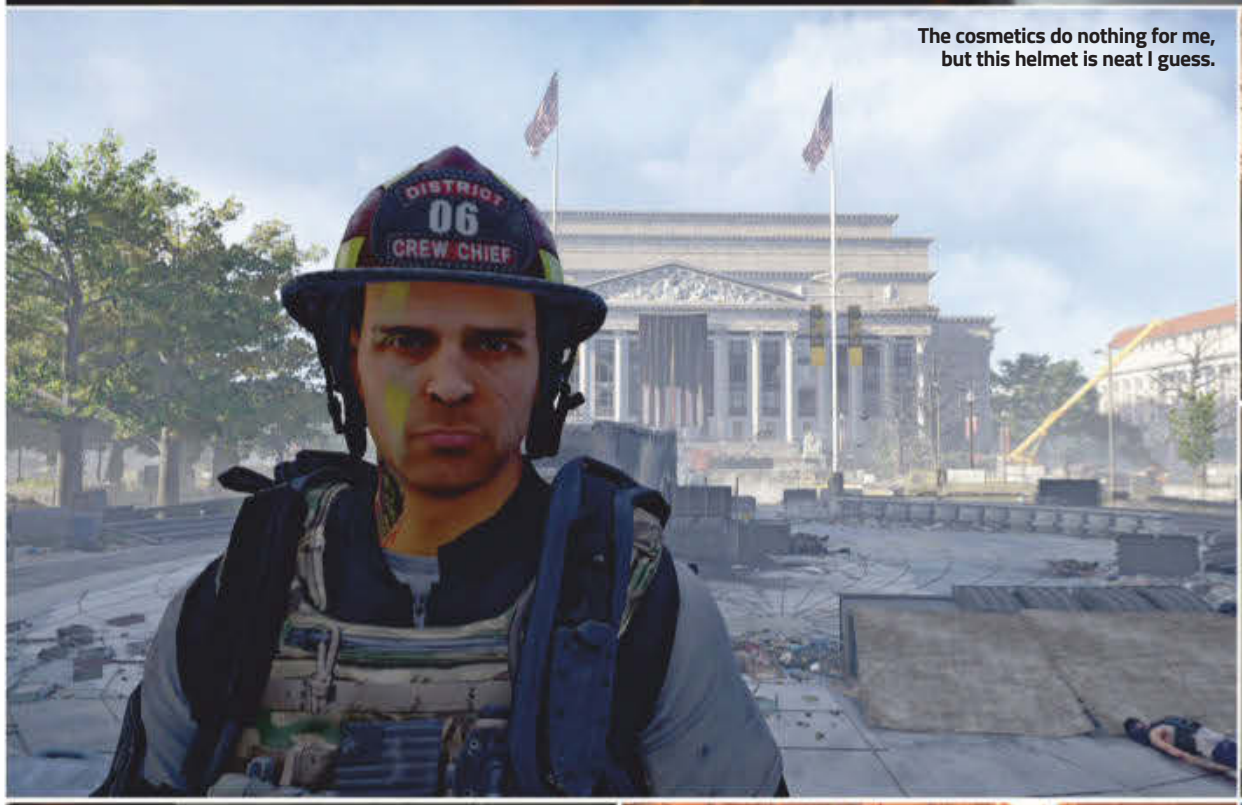
CLASSES THE DIVISION 2'S ENDGAME SPECIALISATIONS

DEMOLITIONIST
Get a grenade launcher that does area of effect damage, and bonuses to explosive power and machine guns.

SURVIVALIST
Improves assault rifle damage and also shotgun damage, so you have a nice short range option too.

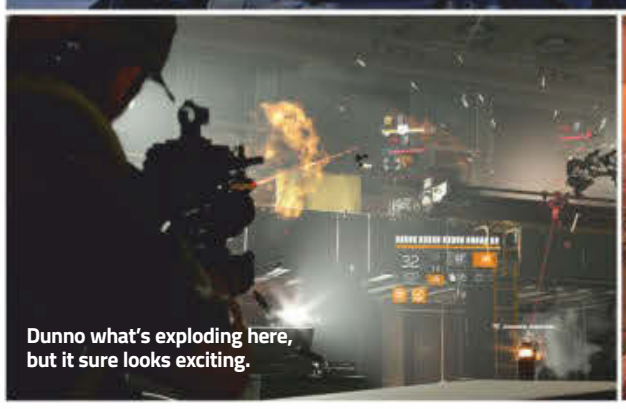
SHARPSHOOTER
Gives you a special sniper rifle that damages nearby enemies after impact with a decompression shockwave.

A beautiful night to fight a drone the size of a dragon.



The cosmetics do nothing for me, but this helmet is neat I guess.

These Mario spin-offs get more tenuous every year.



Dunno what's exploding here, but it sure looks exciting.

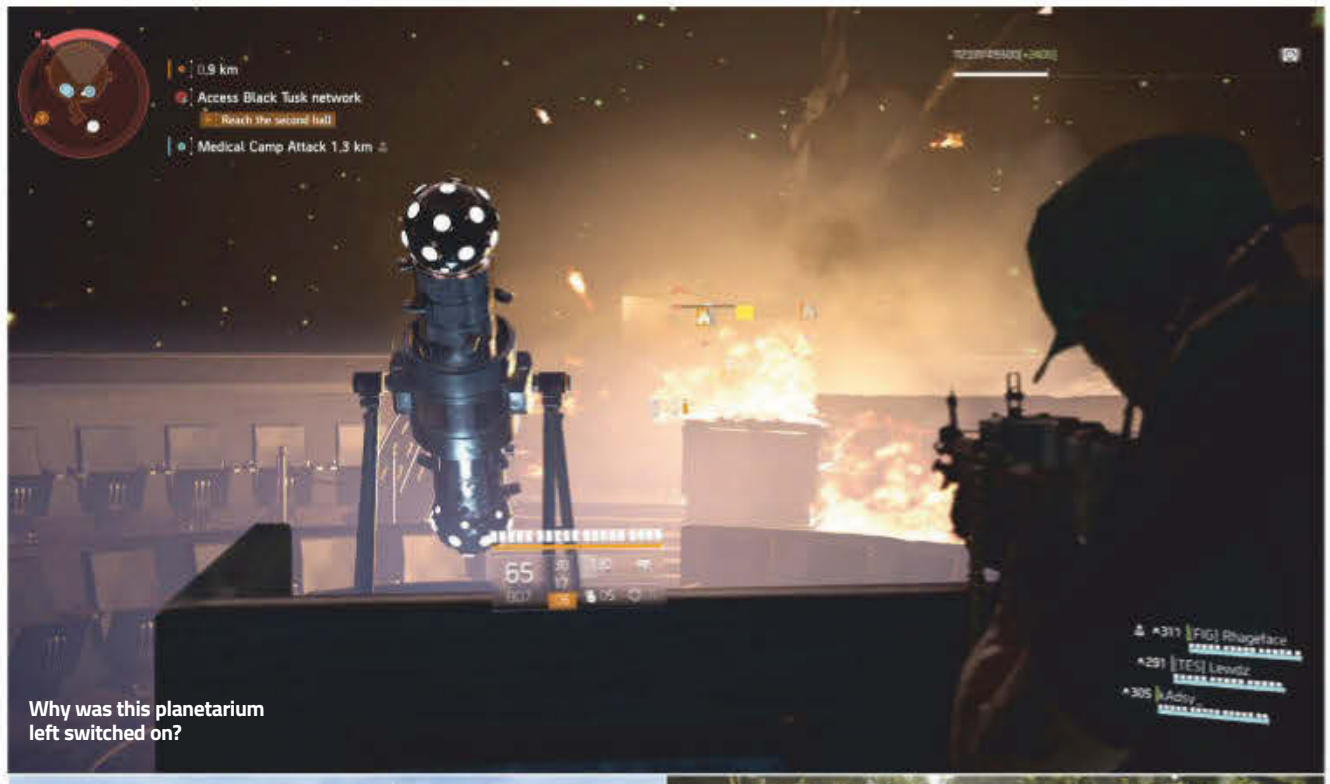
The environmental design in the main missions is fab.

the help of AI pals. They each have the same objectives — clear the area of enemies, fight an elite, then defend the same area and fight another elite — but they're laid out differently enough that they challenge you to think about the space and enemy positioning. At endgame, too, they'll be taken back by enemies, continually climbing in difficulty as you keep reclaiming them for better rewards.

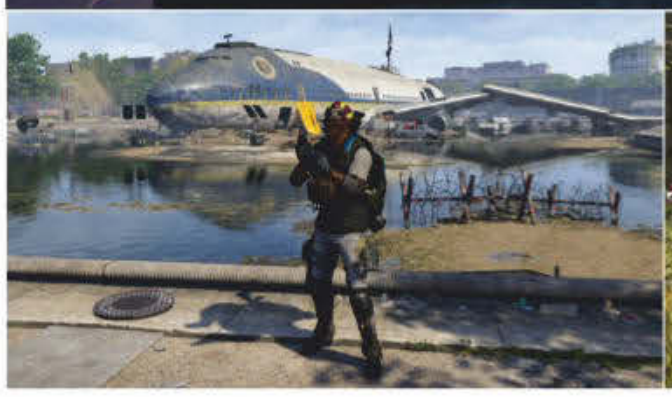
The journey to level 30 has a little filler in the form of side missions or repetitive activities, like stopping propaganda broadcasts, but not much. It's a swift journey. I can't fault The Division 2 for a lack of things to do, though. Coming out of the barren world of Anthem, it's almost refreshing.

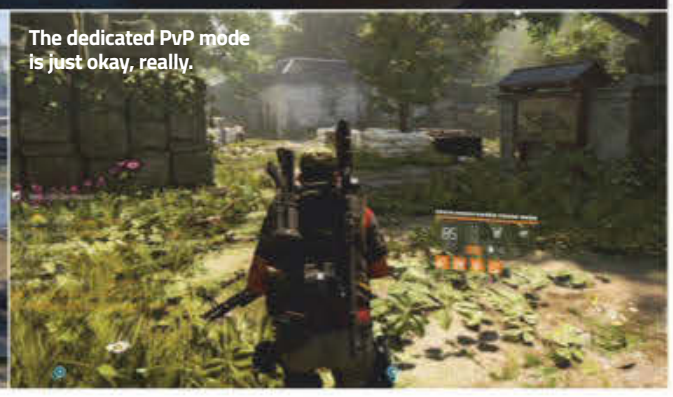
Progression is a lot comfier than the first game. You unlock skills at a fast clip throughout the campaign. You can also open up variants for them with the game's plentiful SHD Tech points early on, rather than having to upgrade different wings of your base like you did in The Division 1. It feels much more flexible, like the developers want you to experiment with your ideal loadouts in advance of reaching the endgame.

It's also refreshingly common to see enemies using novelty weapons and ammo types on you, sending deadly remote controlled cars in your direction, or gumming you up with the Chem Launcher's riot foam while other enemies open fire on you. This gives some real variety and surprise to the game's many shootouts.



Why was this planetarium left switched on?




The dedicated PvP mode is just okay, really.

ABOVE: I'm applauding the view, rather than the act, here.

ENTER ENDGAME

Once you hit the level 30 cap, a new faction called the Black Tusk is added to the game. You then start progressing through World Tiers, which determine the difficulty of the enemies you face and the loot you earn. You'll then revisit most of the earlier main mission locations in their 'invaded' forms, remixed with this high-tech force's new enemy types. The Black Tusk fires off explosive drones like it bought too many of them on sale, and sends in sniper-equipped robot dogs that look like they jogged out of a Metal Gear game. These invaded mission variants are a lot of fun, with enemies often spilling out of different parts of the lev to your first visit.

DEMOLITION MAN

If you were hoping the Black Tusk would entail an entirely new campaign, that's not really what the endgame offers here. The Division 2 successfully feels very different after level 30 by bringing the map to life, though, with enemy movements shown on the map as they reclaim control points, and newer, tougher multi-part bounties to tick off. The Black Tusk also brings its own new activities, like dramatic battles against Batplane-sized drones. The battle for DC really feels like an ongoing struggle, and the higher threat level of activities and rewards provided by higher difficulty main missions means it feels like there's loads more to do.

The real sweetener at level 30 is unlocking the three specialisations, which each have their own new progression paths. They also offer their own signature weapons, which are fantastic fun to unleash, and require a specific ammo type that's a little rare. I've so far focused on the Demolitionist, with nice damage bonuses for my treasured light machine guns, and a wicked class-exclusive turret upgrade that unleashes comically deadly mortar fire. Pleasingly, you can also switch between the three at any time, and completing the upgrade tree for each will definitely take a while to tick off.

It feels like The Division 2 has launched with an extremely healthy supply of things to do, then, but as with any promise of a deep post-game, a lot depends on what happens next — how players feel about the game after a few weeks of digesting what's here at launch, how Ubisoft reacts to that, and whether the post-release content will keep providing good reasons to continue playing. I'm particularly excited to see what The Division 2's version of an eight-player raid looks like, and I hope the planned additions to the campaign bring main missions that are as exciting as what's in here.

The hybrid PvP/PvE area The Dark Zone returns from the first game in three varieties, all a bit different in style and layout. The Dark Zone still has the potential to create great player-generated, nerve-wracking stories, and it too is nice and generous with loot in both infected and clean variants. I really recommend sweeping each map with a group, though.

This is a very complete-feeling follow-up to The Division, from a team that clearly learned a lot about its audience after a series of successful, high-value updates. Dedicated players know they want this already. For everyone else, this is an exciting, moreish shooter set in a genuinely impressive world that already offers tens of hours of enjoyable shooting, exciting skills, and cool loot.

SAMUEL ROBERTS PC

VERDICT:

A packed, rewarding, and frequently thrilling looter shooter that should have a bright future.

8

Anthem

Deeply flawed and frequently frustrating, but it sure is gorgeous.

DEVELOPER TREYARCH • **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
www.callofduty.com

Anthem is a deceptive game. From the first moment I stepped into its world and started meeting its characters, I was stunned by how gorgeous everything is. The jungles of Bastion are jaw-dropping, an alien landscape full of fantastic vistas and wondrous ruins. Likewise, Anthem's characters are alluring. I was fascinated by how lifelike their expressions were, and the voice acting for the main characters is charming and expressive.

That's the problem with Anthem — it coasts entirely on the momentum of its stunning first impression. Once that new game smell began to fade, I started to see Anthem as a derivative, buggy, and at times exasperatingly soulless world.

On a hostile, alien planet, the human race has etched out a meagre survival thanks to the noble efforts of a loose guild of exosuit-wearing warriors called Freelancers. A long time ago, a mysterious alien race shaped the planet by harnessing the Anthem of Creation, a mystical energy that permeates everything. Then those 'Shapers' disappeared.

It sounds exciting, but Anthem's story feels half-finished. Fort Tarsis, my home base that I return to after missions, is a narrative prison where the story and characters are locked away from everything else.

I never really get the sense that we're spending quality time or enduring hardships together, which makes these regular insights into their lives predictable and too easily won. When I should have felt a resolve to protect them, I was mostly indifferent — which is more than I can say about Anthem's villains, who are given so little screen time that I barely understand their mission, let alone their motivations.

IN A BLENDER

As mission after mission blends together, I rarely have a clear understanding of what's happening The story provides a never-ending supply of MacGuffins to chase — Shaper relics, ancient suits of armor, mysterious rituals. Anthem is so full of mysticism and ambiguity that it feels like an excuse to not adhere to the logic of its own world.

Fort Tarsis is also filled with secondary characters who have isolated stories I uncover bit by bit each time I visit. These residents feel superfluous and our exchanges are often awkward and hamfisted, like the time I pretended to be a delusional mother's dead son to help her reconcile his death. Talking to these Fort Tarsis locals doesn't open up interesting avenues in the main story or change how I interact with the settlement in any meaningful way.

HEART OF RAGE

The jungles of Bastion are ridiculously pretty and soaring through them with my squad before each mission is sublime, but the missions themselves are boring and repetitive. Whether I'm doing a story mission, a randomized contract, or one of Anthem's Strongholds (20-minute dungeons that work like Strikes in Destiny 2), there are maybe half a dozen mission objectives that Anthem cycles between again and again and again.

> "It sounds exciting, but Anthem's story feels half-finished."

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You just want power armour

+ Any loot shooter is a good loot shooter

+ You're happy to wait for the game to improve.

Nearly every mission follows the exact same structure: Fly a few minutes to a location, complete the objective, and repeat that process two more times until the mission is over. Though Anthem's world feels large at first, by the end of the campaign I had fought in the same handful of arenas and caves plenty of times.

It's a good thing that Anthem's combat is mostly enjoyable, at least at lower difficulties. Each javelin is like a typical RPG class, with three types of abilities you can augment as you loot more gear. I'm particularly fond of the Storm, who channels the elements into explosive area-of-effect spells that can obliterate entire packs of enemies. Every javelin is fun to play, though, and their abilities erupt with all the flash and force of a nuclear bomb.

The heart of Anthem's combat is the combo system, which requires that teams work together to first afflict enemies with a status effect from one ability, called a 'primer', before hitting them with a 'detonator' ability that triggers a combo and deals massive damage. It's a lot of fun to pull off — not least because the sound effect that indicates a successful combo is so satisfying. Layering these abilities is necessary to efficiently deal with enemies on higher difficulties, so it's baffling that Anthem leaves the combo system almost entirely unexplained. If I went into Anthem without knowing anything about it, I might not even realise it exists.

MASTERWORKS ALL

Now that I'm deep into Anthem's endgame, the gear is getting more exciting at the cost of combat being more aggravating. Calling it an endgame might be giving Anthem too much credit, since the only thing that changes is that I have more challenging missions and two new Strongholds — one of which is actually just the last story mission.

Enemies rarely telegraph their deadlier attacks, which means I'm constantly being one-shotted by hits I didn't see — or worse, attacks I did see and dodged, but that killed me anyway. Instead of flying around like Iron Man laying waste to my enemies, I'm hiding behind rocks scared to stick my head out in case some unseen attack is going to flatten me instantly.

As a live service game, it's reasonable to expect that Anthem will change a great deal, and BioWare seems responsive to feedback. But I'm not going to hold my breath. *STEVEN MESSNER* PC

VERDICT:

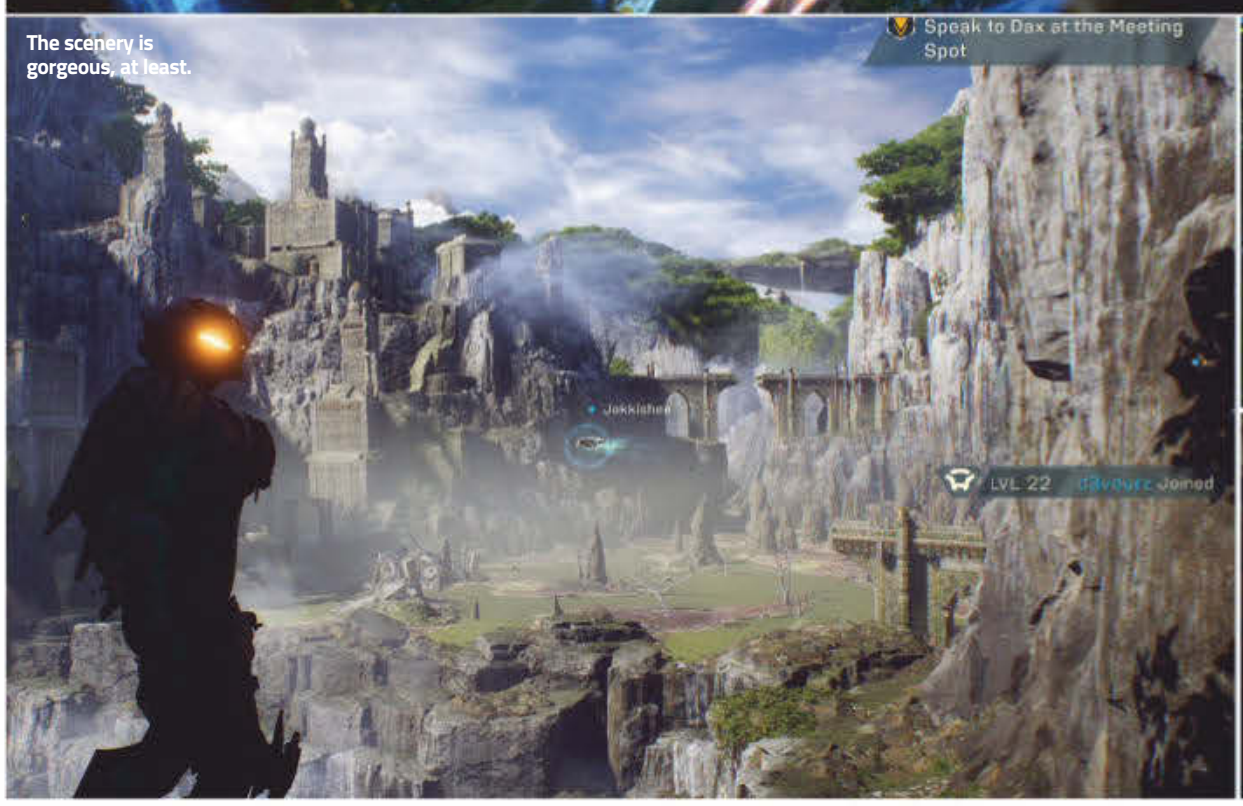
Anthem's disjointed story, boring loot, repetitive missions, and shallow endgame are all disappointing.

5

Ah, yes, another overly long bit of dialogue to skip.

Fort Tarsis is pretty. Pretty dull.

Storms get a special shield while they hover.

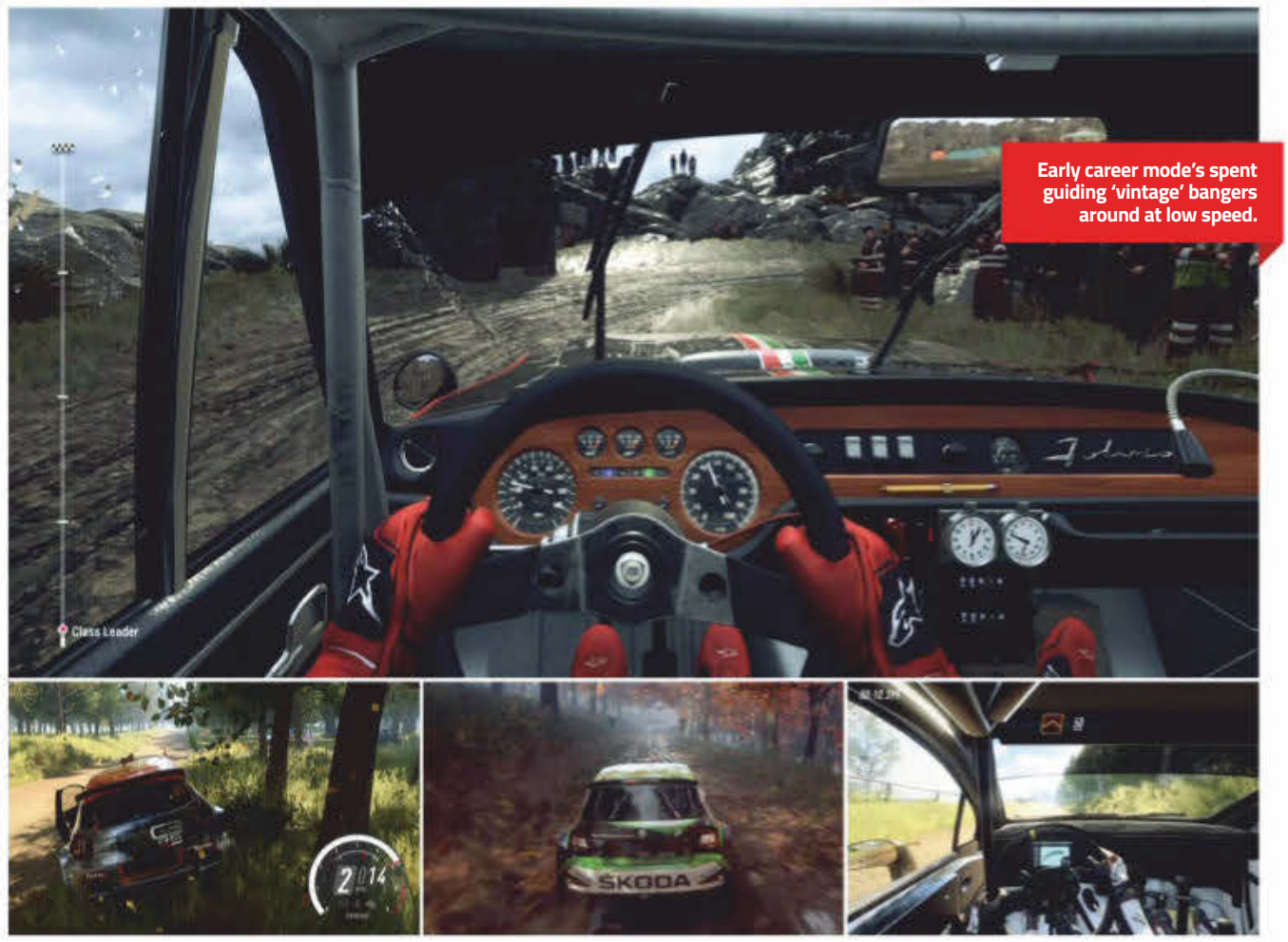


The scenery is gorgeous, at least.

Dirt Rally 2.0

A joy in every corner, Dirt Rally 2.0 edges ahead of its predecessor.

DEVELOPER CODEMASTERS • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE
codemasters.com/game/dirt-rally-2-0/



Early career mode's spent guiding 'vintage' bangers around at low speed.

Most people don't know how it feels to flick the back end of a rally car out on the approach to a blind turn. As a result, Dirt Rally 2.0 requires a greater level of abstract thought to assess its 'simulation' cred than, say, Project Cars 2. You might not have sent a McLaren P1 up Eau Rouge, but you still know how a road car feels on a road. Snarling Group B rally cars speeding across loose surface? Not so much.

That's why Dirt Rally 2.0 exists. Since its earliest outings under the Colin McRae banner, Codemasters' rally series has traded on 'feeling' just right. The way its cars squirm and shift through corners, the way you can keep them just about under control while they power through turns at strange, unnatural angles — it's always felt realistic. Dirt Rally 2.0 tells you how it feels to be a professional rally driver with such fearsome assertiveness you simply believe.

A rally stage is an assault on every sense (alright, not taste or smell), rattling the cockpit camera violently while an audio onslaught of complicated but crucially important pacenotes hits you, whether you're ready for them or not. Force feedback surges through your wheel, fizzing your brain as though you've licked a battery. Whether using a wheel (preferable) or pad, vehicles behave just as you want them to — barely tameable, occasionally balletic in their powerslides, and always convincing.

The sequel uses weather effects and time of day to create real drama. Standing water in between muddy tyre tracks glints under your headlights, dust kicks up around your scrabbling wheels, and each of the six rally locations — New Zealand, Argentina, Spain, Poland, Australia, and the USA — asserts its visual identity instantly, such is the level of environmental detail. It's an incredibly handsome game.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You've always wanted to be Finnish

+ You love getting loose in the corners

+ You want to see the world through a muddy windscreen.

Back from the venerated spec sheets of Codemasters' GRID series is team management, which asks you to hire staff, purchase vehicles, and set liveries as you decide which event to enter next — a rally or a rallycross stage. This is, as if you didn't know, the official game of the 2019 FIA World Rallycross Championship, which means eight licensed tracks spanning the globe and meticulous event recreation across several series.

MORE ACCESSIBLE

Speaking personally, that forgiving AI led to a sensation of 'failing upwards' as I took win after win without truly mastering either car or track. It's probably intended as a means to make Dirt Rally 2.0 more accessible, but I'm not sure it quite works.

Dirt Rally 2.0 feels like progress. Certainly progress in the visuals, but also in the level of immersion thanks to tiny touches like driving beyond the finish line to the steward after each stage. And progress in a sense of overarching structure to single player racing, thanks to the management conceit. The only area it feels lacking, beyond the AI, is licensing. The Rallycross deal is great, but never has a game more richly deserved the WRC licence. Modders will work on car liveries in that regard, but with recognisable cars and names, this might have been the vehicle to bring new fans to rallying. ■ *PHIL IWANIUK* PC

BRINGING BOXY BACK **THREE CARS THAT PERSONIFY RETRO RALLY CHIC**

VOLKSWAGEN GOLF GTI
The quintessential boxy hatchback, turbocharged. Light and agile.

PEUGEOT 205 GTI
Remember that advert where Grace Jones drove one of these out of her own mouth?

BMW E30 M3 EVO RALLY
BMWs haven't been nearly as sexy since they lost that shark-nose front grille.

VERDICT:

Simply put Dirt Rally 2.0 is the best rally sim around building on its predecessor's already fine foundations.

9

Devil May Cry 5

One of the best brawlers on PC.

DEVELOPER CAPCOM • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE
www.devilmaycry5.com

Massive swords! Everyone here is overcompensating.

Devil May Cry 5 is a 16-hour exploration of the hundreds of ways a magical man might hit a demon. Nero hits demons with robot arms like a hyper-aggressive Inspector Gadget. Dante hits demons with two halves of a haunted motorbike. V lets demons do the hitting for him. All things considered, Devil May Cry 5 is one of the best games about hitting demons ever made.

You switch between Nero, V, and Dante across DMC5's 20 missions. A demon called Urizen is using a bad tree called the Qliphoth to drain the city of all its blood, and it's up to the trio to fight through his minions to stop him. The story is preposterous, genuinely funny at points, and supported by earnest performances and quality performance capture. Though the areas you visit can be simplistic and washed out, it's a decent enough setting for combat encounters.

In classic Devil May Cry fashion you clear the level room-by-room and collect ranking scores from each encounter that feed into an overall score for the chapter. The point isn't merely to survive, but to reach the upper echelons of the scoring system and claim the coveted, ridiculous 'Smokin' Sexy Style!' title.

Each character has their own fighting style, but there's plenty of opportunity to find your own preferred approaches within each move-set. Nero's basic abilities let him attack with his sword and revolver. You can hold the fire button to charge the gun and deliver bullets that can stagger enemies, and you can rev your sword like a motorbike to power it up and access fiery new moves. Nero can also whip enemies closer or pull himself towards larger enemies with a tether he fires out of his right arm.

Within this stable framework of go-to combos you use Nero's disposable robot arms to mix up combos or move around. The Gerbera arm lets you fire shockwaves that can propel Nero away from enemy attacks, and the Punch Line can detach and fly around as Nero rides it. The arms break if you take a hit during their special move, but you tailor an arsenal of up to eight arms before a mission starts and detonate them whenever you like. Some arms do give you an advantage over certain enemies, but the system is lax enough to let you pick the arms you really enjoy using in any situation.

If Nero was the only playable character this would still be a fine game, but Devil May Cry 5 offers so much more. Dante can switch between four melee weapons, four ranged weapons, and four combat styles on the fly. All of Dante's weapons are fun, but my favorite is the hat, which captures DMC5's wilful tendency to be incredibly smart and stupid at the same time. You can build your whole combat style around the hat's clever orb switching mechanics. More importantly, you can make any enemy in the game wear a dumb hat. It even works on giant tentacle-faced rhino monsters. It even works on bosses.

DEMON PETS

V is the palate cleanser of the three. He struts around the edges of the battle reading poetry from his book as his pet demons rip up enemies. Once you've landed enough hits to build up your super gauge, you summon a massive oily golem called Nightmare to clobber everything into a near-death state. The demons can't actually kill anything, so you have to teleport V around the battlefield to deal final blows with his cane.

Nero, Dante, and V don't reach their full potential until the end of your first run through. The next difficulty level remixes every combat encounter and lets you keep all of your unlocks. The refresh is so extensive that it makes the main campaign feel like a tutorial, and this is before Capcom adds the Bloody Palace gauntlet mode - which should be out now-ish.

I've been hitting demons in this game for 19 hours so far, and I can easily see myself putting in 19 more. The setting lacks the flair and imagination of the genre behemoth Bayonetta, but there's a greater variety of combat styles and a higher degree of challenge. And that's what will keep me playing until Capcom hopefully releases another one someday.
TOM SENIOR PC

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ MASSIVE SWORDS
+ ROBOT ARMS
+ FASHION

VERDICT:

Three great characters and a beautiful and fluid combat system make this a must-buy for combat game fans.

9

Baba is You

Pushing and shoving the rules.

DEVELOPER HEMPULI OY • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE
hempuli.com/baba

Baba is You, and its developer Arvi 'Hempuli' Teikari, found themselves in the spotlight after a build of the logic puzzler won over IGF Award judges in 2018. With nominations in four of the eight categories, Teikari beat out the likes of Into The Breach to take home the Excellence in Design award, as well as pocketing the Best Student Game prize. Now the full release is here, it's easy to see what the fuss was about.

Baba is You is a spatial word game, of sorts. It combines programming-style commands with Sokoban-esque block pushing to create hugely inventive and varied puzzles. By rearranging the blocks with words on them you can issue new rules for the world or find new ways to interact with the space. You can even totally rewrite the win conditions for a level.

It's an easier concept to understand by playing than talking, so here's an example. In one level you start as a rabbit in a walled room. Inside the room with you are three text blocks — "Wall", "is", and "stop". They're connected in a straight line so the walls currently stop your character from passing through them. If you nudge any of the blocks out of line the walls no longer stop you and you can walk through them.

The blocks which make a win condition for the level aren't yet connected in a line. The simplest solution to that is to push the blocks marked "flag", "is" and "win" into a line. After that, walking to the flag will complete the level. But there are other solutions which immediately start to show you how many possibilities the system involves. You could mix blocks from the first and second room to write "Wall is win". That lets you finish the level by touching any of the walls.

A third solution is to make use of the blocks which determine your avatar — they read "Baba is you" in a vertical line. Don't disconnect them, otherwise "you" no longer exist in the level and cannot interact with it. But you can use "Baba" as the start of a horizontal command, a bit like a programming crossword puzzle. Write "Baba is win" and it makes you the win condition of the level. There's much potential, and it's so satisfying!

If you put yourself in an impossible situation — for example, disrupting the set of blocks which tells the level what you are and triggering an existential conundrum — you can either go back a step (or as many steps as you need), or reset the whole level and start again.

It's an absolute delight. Some levels feel a bit overwhelming, but you soon get into the habit of reading them.

New areas pop up on the world map as you solve more puzzles.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ Wordplay is your jam
+ Puzzles give you life
+ You love thinking both inside and outside of the (text) box.

WORDPLAY

The aesthetic is simple, and works better for simpler levels. When there are a lot of commands at play it can be hard to keep them all straight, especially when they're spread out in corners of the screen. Pausing lets you recap the rules currently active, which helps, but the process adds mental load.

Baba is You deserves its critical acclaim. It's part logic puzzle, part existential quandary, part love letter to how much potential is contained in the building blocks of language.
PHILIPPA WARR PC

VOCABULARY LESSON WHAT THESE WORD COMBOS ACTUALLY MEAN

ROCK IS PUSH
You can move boulders around by pushing them. Without "is push" you'd just walk through them.

TEXT IS FLOAT
Floating text won't be affected by objects that "sink" or "teleport" what's on top of them.

DOOR IS SHUT AND STOP
The door can be removed using any object described as "open".

VERDICT:

Baba is You manages to take the familiar idea of nudging blocks and solving puzzles in a fresh direction. Brilliant.

9

Far Cry New Dawn

Far Cry 5 again, but with a post-apocalyptic paint job.

DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTREAL • **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
far-cry.ubisoft.com/game/en-gb/home

You'd think a nuke being dropped on Montana would have changed it somewhat, but Far Cry New Dawn's post-apocalyptic version of Hope County is essentially the same one we know from Far Cry 5. New Dawn adds a couple of new twists to the series' formula, but nothing to make it feel like a wholly different game. This is Far Cry 5 again, just on a smaller scale, and with a lot more pink flowers.

It's years after the nukes fell at the end of Far Cry 5, and your nameless character has been traveling the country by rail, helping survivors rebuild the post-apocalyptic United States. A group of highwaymen (not that cleverly called the 'Highwaymen') derail your train, and leave you stranded. After making your way to a small community called Prosperity, you venture out into the overgrown remains of Hope County, fighting the Highwaymen, conquering outposts, gathering resources for crafting, and enlisting a small cadre of companions, like an elderly sniper and an enormous boar. This goes without saying, but never bring the sniper. Always bring the boar.

As you help out the locals you gain perk points that can be used to unlock skills in any order you wish, a nice and loose ability system that lets you focus on whatever is most important to your playstyle, be it melee damage, stealth kills, or traversal tools like the wingsuit and grappling hook. A set of five new skills introduced near the end of the game indulge a bit more ridiculousness, giving you fun powers like a double jump and limited-time berserker strength. Now when I swing my spiked baseball bat at a bear it sails comically through the air. These powers seem fresh for a bit, but feel a little unnecessary when I'm already able to insta-kill with stealth takedowns and spawn an endless supply of helicopters.

Combat is the same frantic and fun gunplay as in the past few Far Cry games. Vehicles and barrels explode, fire spreads across grass and trees, enemies recklessly charge and scream, and bombard you with mortars or light you up with flamethrowers, with the occasional wild animal or friendly citizen getting caught up in the chaos.

Feeling a bit OP by the end.

> Five new skills introduced near the end of the game indulge a bit more ridiculousness

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ If you do in fact love the bomb

+ You would have liked to have seen Montana (again)

+ The flowers are pretty.

COUNTY LINES

There are plenty of familiar landmarks on this smaller version of the map (radiation has closed off a portion of it) and several familiar (yet older) characters from the last game are still around. I think we're meant to feel a bit wistful about Hope County — a quest has you collecting old photographs to help you remember what the landscape looked like before the bombs — but it's hard to feel like there's much difference between the world's chaotic past and present, and Far Cry 5 was only just last year, so it's not exactly a nostalgia trip. You can make a few expeditions out of Montana, raiding larger and more imaginative enemy outposts off the main map, like an aircraft carrier on the coast and even Alcatraz.

The big bads of New Dawn, twin sisters Mickey and Lou, are so inconsequential I almost forgot to mention them. Unlike the Seed family in Far Cry 5, they aren't constantly subjecting you to long, drawn out speeches (thank you). The twins only appear a few times, and mostly just issue brief threats over the radio to remind you they exist.

I completed the main story quest in about a dozen hours, and spent a few more mopping up side-quests and exploring. It's brief compared to Far Cry 5, and completable without fully upgrading Prosperity to access the highest levels of gear and vehicles (though you'll definitely want to unlock the best weapons).

While it's good fun at times, New Dawn is really just a quick trip back to Far Cry 5's Montana that hasn't changed much beyond a post-apocalyptic paint job. *CHRIS LIVINGSTON* PC

VERDICT:

Somewhat like Primal before it, New Dawn is a layer of post-nuke paint spread over the familiar Far Cry experience.

7

Eastshade

Makes screenshotting an intrinsic part of play.

DEVELOPER EASTSHADE STUDIOS • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE
www.eastshade.com

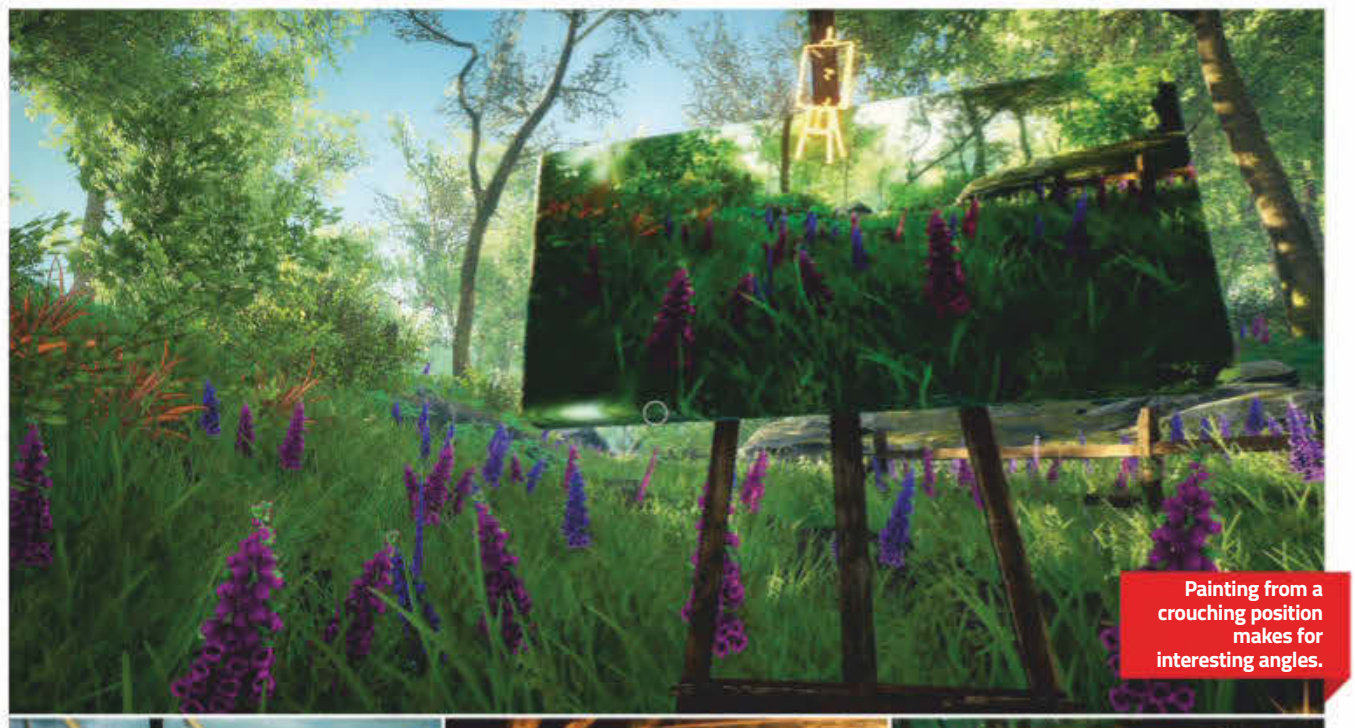
Do you know who I admire? Anika from Eastshade. Anika lives in a little hut between the port of Lyndow and the city of Nava in the game. She's obsessed with owls. Can't get enough of them. When she's not sitting in her hovel she's tramping through the ferns making hooting noises.

I, on the other hand, am playing a traveling artist. I came to Eastshade to paint pictures in tribute to my mother via a type of in-game screenshotting. It's this art focus which sets Eastshade apart from other games which muddle about in high fantasy settings.

The game opens with your character being shipwrecked. You wake up in a cave just outside the tiny port of Lyndow and start to explore, quickly accumulating a to-do list, idly picking up sticks and flowers, and noting how picturesque everything is. You learn how to make canvases out of bits of wood and fabric under the guise of teaching a little kid in Lyndow how to do it.

Painting involves picking a canvas — either a fresh one or a used one you're happy to paint over. Once you've picked your surface you compose the image. This is done by cropping the view you have onscreen using a rectangle guideline. Pressing E paints whatever's in the rectangle, applying some effects so that what's shown on an easel, which appears in the world, isn't a straightforward screenshot, but takes on a painterly quality. Each painting costs inspiration, which you collect by visiting new areas or doing tasks.

Pretty games aren't unusual, but Eastshade's design is closer to that of a garden. The buildings feel more like follies than houses, the bridges come straight from Arcadian paintings, and curated lines of sight are key.



Painting from a crouching position makes for interesting angles.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You can't paint, but really want to
+ Non-violence is your thing
+ Owls.

The main purpose of the game is to collect four paintings which correspond to your mother's memories of the place, but in trying to reach those locations you end up following little side stories — a religious conflict involving hallucinogenic tea, a neighborly dispute over whether a guy who keeps getting jars stuck on his head is a good parent, a tiny quest involving a stolen book.

You can use what you gather to brew teas which offer different effects, trade feathers for money, or build a raft or a reed boat to cross the water.

SHE'S A HOOT

Eastshade isn't huge — I finished in about ten hours — but it is charming. There are memorable characters — Anika and her owl obsession, the ship's captain who hates you because you don't understand how much she loved her boat, the night drummers — and the screenshot mechanic is enough of a point of difference that the fairly familiar story setup still feels fresh.

The game crashed a lot, so I'd advise saving frequently. Some of the tasks don't flow smoothly. I could also do with a few more map markers.

But even with these quibbles, using image capture as part of the game is fascinating. Tying it to a finite resource and making you compose a shot before you paint means you make decisions about what to capture in a different way to normal screenshotting. *PHILIPPA WARR* PC

GAMES WITH AN INTERESTING TAKE ON IMAGE CAPTURE

FIREWATCH
Use the in-game disposable camera to snap a limited number of shots, then order them as real prints.

NO MAN'S SKY
Developed with DeadEndThrills' Duncan Harris, *NMS* photo mode offers filters, lighting control and more.

BIOSHOCK
The research camera lets you learn enemy weaknesses and gain bonuses by taking photos of foes.

VERDICT:

Eastshade is a charming traveling artist adventure which uses image capture in interesting ways.

8

Hypnospace Outlaw

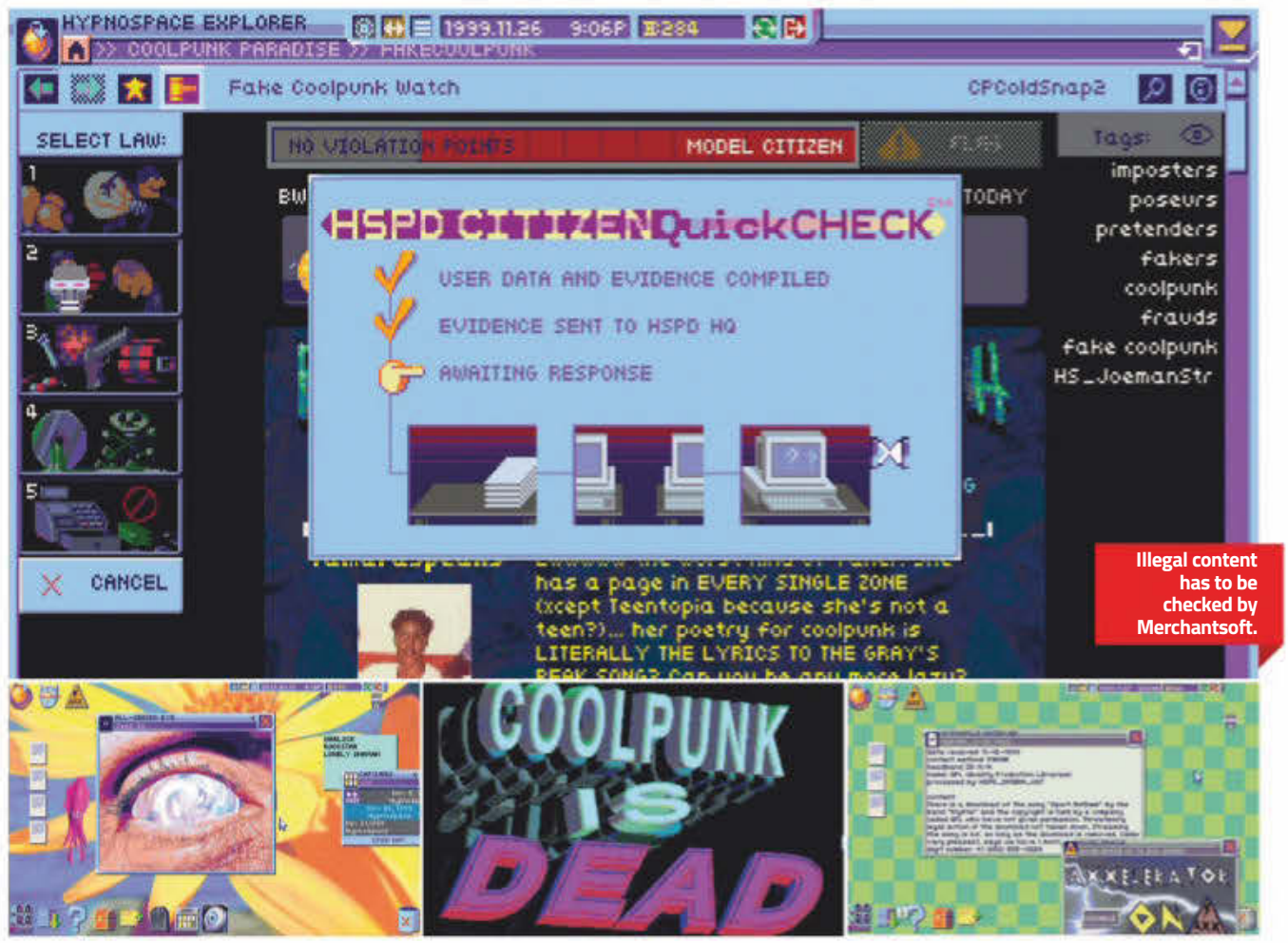
Police the internet of the past.

DEVELOPER TENDERSHOOT • **PUBLISHER** NO MORE ROBOTS
hypnospace.net

Once upon a time, the internet was something you went on rather than something that was always there. It was a thing you'd occasionally enjoy, usually in the evenings when it was cheaper; not a fibre optic thread running through every facet of your existence. And Hypnospace Outlaw, a cyber-detective adventure set within a fictional computer operating system, is a nostalgic return to this Old Internet. In the game's alternate 1999, people climb into bed at night, snap on a high-tech headband, and drift into Hypnospace. This garish low-res internet, inspired by the digital shanty towns of GeoCities, is fully realised. There are hundreds of pages to click around, split into zones that reflect the personalities of their eccentric creators.

You are an Enforcer hired by the creator of Hypnospace, Merchantsoft, to locate and destroy objectionable content. This could be copyright infringement, harassment, or malicious software. And when you find something that breaks the rules you click on the gavel at the top of your browser, then on the offending article, and watch as it's scrubbed from the internet. In return you receive a bounty of HypnoCoins — a currency used to buy software, desktop wallpapers, virtual pets, and screensavers.

But it becomes clear after a few cases that you are not a force for good, and have been weaponised by Merchantsoft to ruthlessly censor and control the web. An early case sees you removing cute kids' drawings from a teacher's website because they contain a copyrighted image of a cartoon character. Bringing the gavel down on these harmless doodles was genuinely difficult, and the sound of HypnoCoins tinkling into my virtual wallet only made me feel worse.



Illegal content has to be checked by Merchantsoft.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You miss your GeoCities page

+ You still love UNDER CONSTRUCTION gifs

+ You believe the 90s was a cultural highpoint.

Later cases are much more involved Tasks include busting an illegal file-sharing ring and infiltrating a hacker collective, and doing so requires some genuine detective work. You use a search engine to trawl the web for unlisted pages, secret communities, and passwords, and I had to have a notebook on hand to keep track of important names and keywords.

COMPUTER LOVE

The interface holds everything together well, being a fully functional operating system in its own right. You can drag icons around the desktop, download and open documents, listen to audio files in a WinAmp-style media player, and even change your screensaver. It's also possible to contract viruses.

It all feels nicely clicky, although it can get a little confusing when you have a lot of windows open simultaneously. I also found the slow loading times, as authentic as they are, a little frustrating when trying to navigate quickly between pages. You can waggle the mouse cursor to make the page furniture pop in more quickly, which is a cute idea, but the novelty wore off pretty quickly.

Those criticisms aside, Hypnospace Outlaw is, rather unexpectedly, one of the best detective games on PC. It respects you enough to let you figure things out at your own pace, and with almost no hand-holding. Its internet is a joyous explosion of art, music, creativity, and weirdness, and a pleasure to explore. *ANDY KELLY* PC

ZONED OUT PLACES TO CALL HOME IN HYPNOSPACE

OPEN EYED
A zone for all the truth seekers. UFOs, conspiracy theories, new age weirdness, and a generous helping of paranoia.

GOODTIME VALLEY
Do you miss the good old days, when everything was fields and you could leave your doors unlocked? Welcome home.

TEENTOPIA
A hangout for sulky teens. If you're into emo music and unnecessary drama, this is the Hypnospace zone for you.

VERDICT:
A satisfying detective adventure based around a weird and wonderfully imaginative retro internet.

8

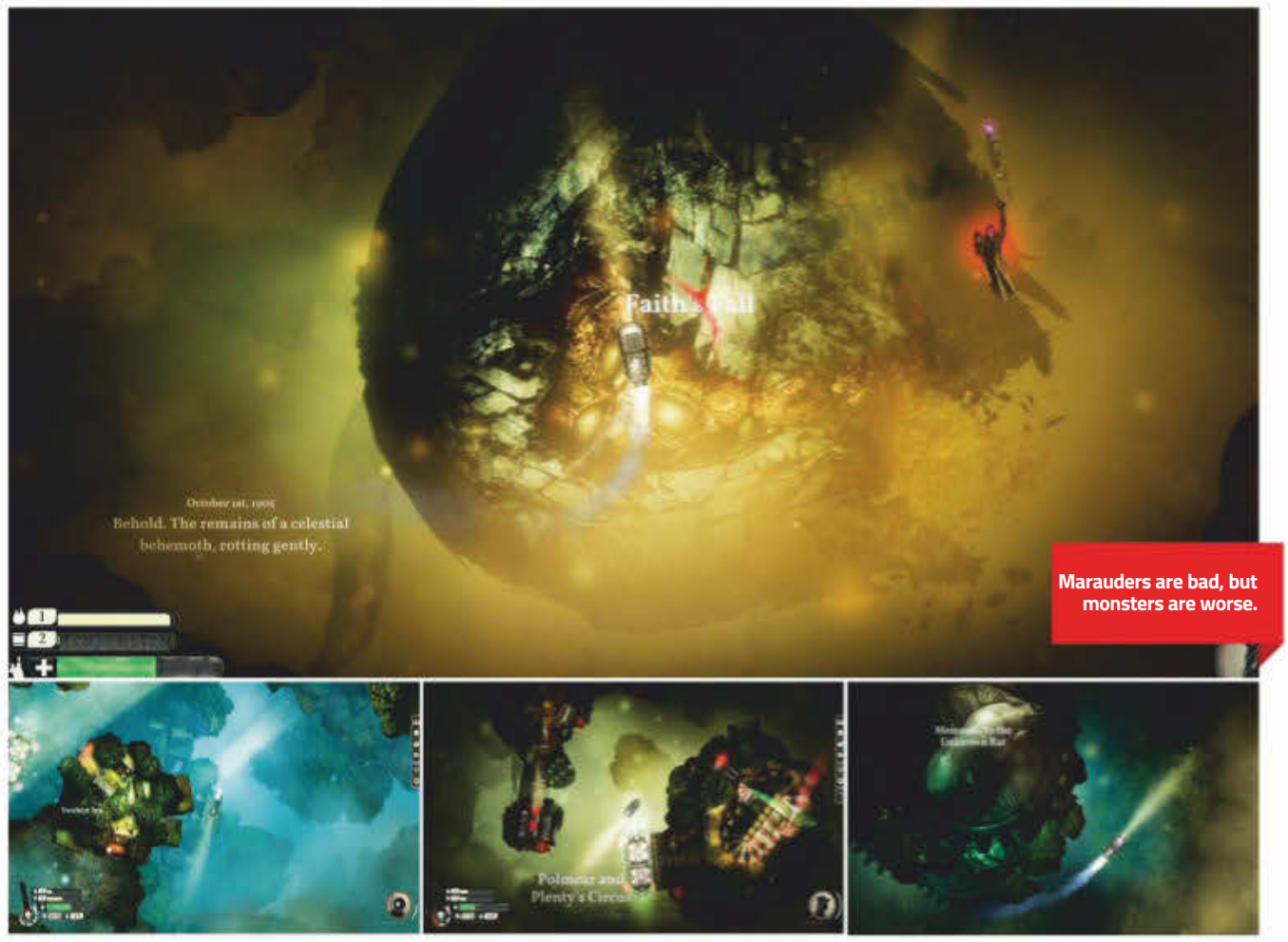
Sunless Skies

Enjoy a train ride into madness in the disturbing, unforgettable Sunless Skies.

DEVELOPER FAILBETTER GAMES • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE
failbettergames.com/sunless-skies

We have a Marvel Cinematic Universe, so why not a Failbetter Interactive Universe? The third game in the world of Fallen London also has its share of daring heroics in the face of impending doom, but instead of saving the world you're usually trying to save yourself. In a place where time comes in barrels and souls in jars, where the horrors of the skies can cause you to lose your marbles, it's probably easier to lapse into villainy. Not least when food supplies run out, and your crewmates begin to look awfully tasty.

The follow-up to Sunless Sea is in keeping with Failbetter Games' fondness for putting players into crisis management mode from minute one. As second in command to a dying captain, you've got to guide your tired locomotive into port, and then take over. You're free to choose your own path from there, but without a map it's not going to be easy. Fame, fortune, and a long-standing mystery are among the goals, but your initial job is just to stay alive.



Marauders are bad, but monsters are worse.

In many respects, it's similar to its predecessor. At once a piece of interactive fiction, an RPG, a survival game, and a top-down adventure. You explore the world at a slow, methodical pace in a rickety craft that can't take much punishment, picking up cargo and the odd passenger and ferrying them between ports. On land or in the air you'll face choices which can be influenced by the character you rolled at the start, and the dice that subsequently determine success or failure.

Break it down to its fundamentals, and Sunless Skies can sound unremarkable. It works because of how brilliantly those disparate elements combine to produce exciting stories, from scrapes you survive by the skin of your teeth, to moments your own hubris gets you killed. Where Sunless Sea fell down slightly was the way the natural repetition of its roguelike structure gradually sucked the life out of those stories. You'll soon discover Failbetter hasn't exactly gone soft, but it has found ways to cushion the blow.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ You love space trains

+ Great writing excites you

+ You just want to explore.

DEAD AGAIN

Start again, and you'll gain much of the previous captain's experience to spend how you like, while keeping your ship minus one installed add-on. Depending on what's removed, this can feel like a real kick in the teeth, especially if it's something you recently spent money on. In other words, death is a punishment, but it's not too severe — and it can even be a blessing in disguise. Every episode is informed by the type of captain you were at the start and the decisions you've made ever since; some even by your predecessor. And so while some things will be familiar on a replay, plenty won't.

Beyond the changes you make, the sheer range of scenarios and potential outcomes means you'll discover something new on every run. This time you might risk pressing on through a storm for the chance to encounter a three-headed fox, rather than turning back.

All of which makes it easier to get to what really makes Sunless Skies great — the writing. Evocative, witty, and razor sharp, it turns text into a reward. In these moments you'll realize that while you may not have achieved your goal, Failbetter certainly has. *CHRIS SCHILLING* PC

FOUR OFF THE FLOOR **A QUARTET OF FACES IN THE CLOUD...**

INDURATE VETERAN
Scowling, scarred, and smoking, she'll pay a pretty penny for your port reports.

PARSIMONIOUS CHAIRMAN
A bad egg who wants you to take out the Tacketies — for a fee, of course.

AMENABLE HOST
Help him investigate his mysterious past, and he'll cure what ails you.

REPENTANT DEVIL
On the straight and narrow? Maybe. Who knows? But now there's a corpse on board...

VERDICT:

The sharpest writing around wrapped inside an adventure that's tough, but rarely unfair. Failbetter's finest hour.

9

Slay the Spire

One of the most elegantly designed games in recent memory.

DEVELOPER MEGA CRIT • **PUBLISHER** MEGA CRIT
www.megacrit.com

The joy of a singleplayer card game like Slay the Spire is that it puts absolutely and utterly brilliant broken combos within your grasp. It feels good to deal 50 poison damage to something. But it feels even better when you drop a series of cards that sextuples that amount of poison, kills an enemy, and triggers a corpse explosion that cascades splash damage to all of the other things that are trying to kill you.

Slay the Spire's achievement is the way it makes this feeling of power simultaneously so potent and elusive. This is an intricately designed deck-building game grounded in deliberate balance, populated by confounding enemies, steady rewards, and tactile decks of cards that play like efficient, beautiful machines of your own creation.

Slay the Spire splits its 283 cards across three characters — The Ironclad, The Silent, and The Defect. The fantasy monsters that stand between the character you pick and the top of the spire don't play cards of their own. Instead they fight sort of like a pokémon, inflicting damage, pesky status effects, or buffing themselves each turn. These actions are telegraphed in advance through the UI. The outcome of this design is that I never feel cheated when I die; rare for a roguelike or card game, let alone one that intersects the two.

Simply knowing Slay the Spire's combos or best cards isn't enough to earn a win. Your willingness to abandon your sweet deck idea when the RNG isn't serving up, say, loads of lightning orb cards for the Defect character is itself a skill.

Every enemy has its own trick.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

+ A good cArd-combo leaves you breathless

+ None of your friends want to play Magic with you anymore.

KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR THESE GREAT CARDS

ECHO FORM
THE DEFECT
Your first card of every turn is automatically double-played. See what happens when you play two of them.

ADRENALINE
THE SILENT
Free energy, free cards. It's all about momentum, and this is a shot in the arm to any anaemic turn.

FEED
THE IRONCLAD
Who needs defense when you have 200 HP? Pairs with self-damaging cards like Offering to great effect.

CARD FU

There are moments when Slay the Spire feels like a turn-based fighting game. The audio does most of this work, serving up expressive sounds that convey motion and impact in addition to training your brain on fine details like status effect triggers. The glacial crunch when my Defect drops multiple frost orbs is ear candy. One deck type for The Silent became one of my favorites because of the sound it made. This 'death by a thousand cuts' build is all about playing as many zero-cost attack cards as possible in order to accumulate absurd strength and defense bonuses through relics. Over four or five combat rounds, your pinpricks transform into gouging, 40-damage swings. When this deck is in full motion, it's a chorus of stacking steel as a dozen shivs leave your hand as quickly as they enter.

ATTACK THE BLOCK

Slay the Spire's playful fantasy art, on the other hand, contributes less to the joy of its combat. Enemies don't animate a whole lot, and as I battled these monsters again and again I found myself exclusively looking at the cards in my hand rather than taking in the fight. Darkest Dungeon remains the pinnacle of this style of art for its skull-rattling 2D combat camerawork, and Slay the Spire might have benefited from this kind of cinematic flare.

One other poke I'd make — I don't love that blocking damage feels so central to victory. Tracking down the relics and cards to create ample defence is by no means automatic, but across all three characters, loading up on block was the common thread in my wins. Still, this seems trivial.

The essence of what makes a great card game is readily available here — the joy of building a machine and optimising it as much as you can.

If that isn't enough, recently added moddability is already bringing new decks, enemies, and cards to tinker with.
EVAN LAHTI PC

VERDICT:
A strategically deep deckbuilder that, with any luck, has spawned a brilliant, new subgenre.

9

Tech 276

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE.

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

GEAR THIS ISSUE

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THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU INTEL I7 7700K *intel.com.au*
MOBO ASUS Z270 ROG CROSSHAIR VI HERO *asus.com.au*
RAM 2 X BALLISTIX 8GB DDR4-3200 *crucial.com*
PSU CORSAIR 850W PSU *corsair.com*
COOLING H105 CORSAIR COOLER *www.corsair.com.au*

Get RTXed: 20-series gaming laptop roundup

Nvidia wants to show you the light with its new 20-series cards, but do they offer enough to entice you across to the novel paradigm of ray traced gaming? Joel Burgess hits the Labs to find out.

Nvidia's new RTX cards have finally made their way to the gaming laptop space and what better way to welcome the new generation than with a gladiatorial battle where they're all pitted against one another. We have three units from each of the RTX 2060, 2070, and 2080 categories this year, giving us a good indication of the various graphical capabilities of each. Nvidia's big selling point for its 20-series graphics cards is the addition of a game rendering technique called ray tracing, and while there are only a handful of tests you can run for ray tracing performance we pegged a couple of the important ones here.

There's very little CPU diversity in the 2019 RTX offerings and every unit bar three came with a 15.6-inch 144Hz IPS display (Lenovo, Gigabyte and MSI's offerings had G-Sync, UHD or 17.3-inch panels, respectively). This means that the main variation we saw was in the storage offering, where many of the more forward-looking units were seeking to put in bigger PCIe connected SSDs, with some even using faster NVMe drives, and using them in RAID 0 configurations for 3000+MB/s read and write speeds.

While Nvidia's Max-Q is pushing the company towards better efficiencies and lower thermals, this was many of the laptop's second time using an Intel Core i7-8750H CPU (or even the third) and all of them were keen to push the limits of this chip meaning CPU max temperatures were generally above 970C.

In other words the competition was hot and there's plenty to dig into in this year's RTX laptop offerings.

RTX 2080

Alienware m15

This Alienware's a little too familiar to be from another world.

PRICE $4,898
dell.com

Alienware has always had a reputation for offering high end laptops with the most premium components and this year's m15 is no different. Like a poisonous creature this laptop has a powdery red skin on the topside of the clamshell that bleeds into a soft black keyboard surround. The keyboard and trackpad (much like the well worn angular chassis design) aren't anything revolutionary but they both feel nice enough to use to forget about that. The 15.6inch screen on this unit has a 144Hz refresh rate, lining up with most of the offerings in this year's roundup. The screen however does have a decidedly blue tinge to it and it's probably one of the worst in the roundup when it comes to cutting glare. In general work and home tasks the CPU performed above average across all of our benchmarks, but this came at a thermal cost since it was one of only two units that we pegged with a maximum CPU temperature of 1000C.

When it comes to gaming the Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 performed as well as we were expecting, pushing out above 60fps averages on everything but Ghost Recon Wildlands on Ultra 1080p settings. The m15 did manage to top the group in ray tracing performance getting an average framerate of 50fps on Metro: Exodus. At two hours and 10 minutes, battery life wasn't stand out, but it was definitely one of the longer lasting devices. The one major benefit of the m15 over the Blade 15 from Razer is an additional 1TB of SSHD space for all the games you'll want to hit with this unit.

VERDICT: **The Alienware M15 is a solid choice for a premium RTX gaming laptop, but it is handicapped a little by a disappointing screen.**

8

RTX 2080

Razer Blade 15

Is the Blade 15 still a cut above the rest?

PRICE $5,099
razer.com

Razer's 2018 blade 15 was one of the best gaming laptops of last year and the subtle chassis tweaks and a hefty set of RTX GPU upgrades definitely don't hold it back. While of course the new graphics cards are the centrepiece of the update, the chassis has a re-honed squarer shape that will annoy anyone who likes the palm rest to be rounded. There's been an update to the RGB lighting, which minimises light bleed from underneath the chiclet keys and makes this flashy feature look far more sophisticated. This marries with some of the best feeling membrane keyboards available and a sleek, nicely sized trackpad.

While this unit was more than 20% behind the top units in Cinebench's Multi-threaded CPU benchmark and HWBot's x265 media encoding benchmarks, it performed better across the range of CPU tests, landing somewhere in the middle of the pack across the rest of the home and work activity tests. Most of these performance units were running hot so the Blade 15's 970C max CPU temp wasn't the highest we saw. The Blade 15 comes with the option of an RTX 2060, 2070 or 2080 and the model we tested was running the most powerful of the three – so it had some of the highest scores of the roundup. The Blade 15 got top marks in most real world game test with big leads on titles like the Division 2 and Far Cry Primal, but it was surpassed by the Alienware 15's framerates on Metro: Exodus with ray tracing on. It did have a lower than expected battery life, but it wasn't bad enough to seriously dull the sleek Razer Blade 15.

VERDICT: **A great looking and powerful gaming ultrabook that offers no compromise performance if you're happy to pay the premium.**

9

RTX 2080

MSI GS75 Stealth 8SG

MSI just snuck another bombshell into the powerful gaming ultrabook category.

PRICE $4,799
au.msi.com

MSI massively upped its game last year with the GS65 Stealth Thin, receiving full marks from a range of independent outlets, but the GS75 Stealth 8SG we have here may be an even bigger success. At just 1.8cm thick it's almost as thin as its smaller sibling, despite packing an Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 (Max Q) GPU and a whopping 32GB of RAM. The GS75 Stealth 8SG has the only 17.3inch display of the roundup, yet its tiny bezels and better screen to body ratio make it difficult to tell that the GS75 Stealth 8SG is actually a bigger unit. The 144Hz screen is powered by a generous 80Wh battery that gets 3 hours and 18 minutes in PCMark 8's Home battery benchmark — 30% more than the average laptop here. This unit comes with two 512GB Samsung NVMe PCIe SSDs that are configured in RAID 0, which effectively doubles NVMe SSD write times to an absurdly fast 3407 MB/s.

This unit ended up fractionally below average on direct CPU processing benchmarks, but it managed to do better in general work and home computing tasks edging above the middle of the pack. The GS75 Stealth 8SG generally had fps averages around 5% behind the top performing RTX unit on real-world game benchmarks, but it was never more than 10% off the leader.

The GS75 Stealth 8SG's keyboard does feel a little mushier than many of the offerings here, but it's at least nice to type on and the new ultra-wide trackpad is an awesome addition that looks and feels great.

VERDICT: **The GS75's 17-inch screen, 32GB RAM allocation, ultra thin form factor, solid battery life, nice trackpad, impressive performance and surprisingly low price tag, make it the device to beat this year.**

10

RTX 2070

Asus ROG Zephyrus S GX531

Is the RTX Zephyrus full of hot air?

PRICE $2,399
asus.com/au

The Zephyrus has been one of the more innovative gaming ultrabooks we've seen in the past couple of years, pioneering a pop up rear ventilation system alongside the launch of Nvidia's Max-Q mobile cards and fundamentally altering the keyboard layout to have a vertical trackpad that sits to the right of the keyboard and doubles as a number pad. These features have both been well received, on balance, and continue to give this year's models a much thinner profile and the ability to use reach the WSAD keys without having to rest your palm on a hot laptop chassis.

The Zephyrus S GX531 is running the same Intel Core i7-8750H / 16GB RAM combo as all the other units here, but the model we looked at was paired with an Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070. This unit performed within 10% of the average across all CPU benchmarks but its compact chassis did bump up the GPU max temperature by 7% to a high of 820C. Despite running hotter, the graphical performance wasn't impacted significantly with the Zephyrus still able to push games like The Division 2 and Total War: Warhammer 2 above 60fps on 1080p Ultra settings. While the 63.8Wh lithium-ion battery performed well considering its capacity, it still only managed 2 hours and 17 minutes, which was a little disappointing for the gaming ultrabook category. The Zephyrus S GX531's 15.6-inch screen was one of the more vibrant on offer, but the M.2 SSD only gets read and write scores of 1709.2/955.1 which is more than 40% lower than NVMe SSDs.

VERDICT: **The Zephyrus S GX531 is a well rounded gaming ultrabook with a number of unique perks that is great value if you can get it on sale at the price listed here.**

9

RTX 2070

Gigabyte Aero 15X

Is the 2019 Aero 15 another one to Gigabyte the dust?

PRICE $3,399
gigabyte.com/au

Gigabyte was ambitious this year, adding a top of the line Core i9 RTX 2080 configuration to its Aero 15 offerings, but the gamble on this model didn't exactly pay off,since it suffered from thermal throttling and a major price hike. We've looked at the Gigabyte Aero 15X here which has a loadout of an Intel Core i7-8750H CPU, an Nvidia GeForce GTX 2070 (Max-Q) GPU and 16GB of RAM. While this is a pretty standard configuration, Gigabyte does offer the largest battery of the bunch at 94.2Wh. Despite being 17.8% bigger than MSI's GS75 Stealth 8SG, the Aero 15X's lithium ion battery actually ran dry 14.1% earlier when running with a more intensive 15.6-inch 4K screen. We'd recommend opting to save yourself the $800 it'll cost to bump the screen to 4K and double the RAM allocation.

The Aero 15X still has one of the smallest footprints with an envelope of 356.4 x 250mm, and it weighs in at 2.11 (impressive considering the battery allocation). While the PCMark 8 Scores here were 15% lower than average, this may be due to software iterations since all other CPU benchmarks were only about 1-2% off the average.

There are a couple of new features on this device that might swey early adopters including Microsoft's machine learning power management system Azure AI (which can bump frame rates by 15% on some games), and a neat control centre that'll make sure you're never running out of date drivers.

VERDICT: **A compact RTX gaming ultrabook that offers premium performance for a reasonable price when configured with an i7 CPU, a 2070 GPU and a 144Hz screen.**

8

RTX 2070

Lenovo Legion Y740 (15)

Is Lenovo's first RTX rig a formidable opponent or just another face in the crowd?

PRICE $3,169
lenovo.com/au

When you consider its direct opponents are the ROG Zephyrus and the Gigabyte Aero 15, Lenovo's Legion Y740 isn't much to look at. Yes the rear interface hub is useful and the grey metal complexion would slip neatly into any workspace, but its appearance is so bland that you might lose this RTX gaming rig amongst the most drab workstations.

On paper the 15.6-inch 144Hz screen looks the same as the other screens on offer here, it is however, significantly less vibrant with a peak nit brightness of 300 and a poor anti-glare coating that washes it out. It may be the dullest of the bunch but this screen goes some way to redeeming itself by including Nvidia's G-Sync technology, which will allow you to prevent screen tearing and unwanted artifacts at whatever framerate you card spits out. And the Legion Y740 is capable of throwing down some pretty fast frame rates, pushing averages above 60fps on everything except Ghost Recon: Wildlands at 1080p Ultra settings. We were impressed by the overall CPU performance of the Lenovo Legion Y740 too.

While the storage 256GB SSD and 1TB HDD configuration on the Lenovo Legion is more than serviceable, we're used to seeing it on lower end devices and many of the alternatives here are offering bigger faster-speed storage allocations overall.

The keyboard doesn't offer much resistance or travel distance, the track pad is unnecessarily small and the 57Wh battery was the smallest of the bunch, lasting just 1 hour and 34 minutes in PCMark 8's Home battery life benchmark.

VERDICT: **If you need G-Sync then this is your only option from this group, but you'll have to be willing to sacrifice on a few fronts to get it.**

6

RTX 2060

Aftershock Apex 15X

Is Aftershock's 15-inch RTX unit at the top of the 2019 gaming-laptop mountain?

PRICE $2,768
aftershockpc.com.au

We're a little on the fence about Aftershock's Apex 15X. In many ways it's a reasonable entry level gaming laptop, but when you consider it costs $2,768 on special it's a bit of a hard sell. See as this goes to print there will still be a number of retailers trying to get through laptops with Nvidia's 10 series GPUs. We saw an Aorus X5 v8 with an i7-850H CPU and a GTX 1070 going for $2,599 and a 2018 Razer Blade with a GTX 1070 going for $2,859, and while these units are older, they perform as well, if not better than, the Aftershock Apex 15X. That said, if you are really keen on Nvidia's new ray tracing features then you're going to side with this unit.

One of the first things we noticed was that the Apex 15X is wrapped in a lot of brushed aluminum, the same kind we used to give MSI grief about because it makes premium devices look cheap. And while the edge-to-edge keyboard and trackpad look nice, both felt extremely flakey. The keyboard was shallow and mushy, with either a lack of n-key rollover or just very imprecise actuations since it regularly missed producing letters while typing and the trackpad rattled on clicking, making you feel like it might break at any moment.

The Aftershock Apex 15X performed much better showing a 10% bump on the multi threaded Cinebench CPU benchmark and sitting around average on all general working tasks. Graphically it was only between 6 and 14% behind the average game framerates of the 2070 units in this roundup and it was over 5% better than the Metabox Alpha X on all gaming titles.

VERDICT: **The Aftershock Apex 15X is an entry level RTX laptop that performs well but could do with an interface upgrade and a price cut.**

7

RTX 2060

Dell G5 15

Is Dell's latest G5 a bright light or a whitewash?

PRICE $3,099
dell.com

Dell's white Special Edition G5 15 has one of the most innovative gaming laptop chassis designs we've seen in the last few years. While it doesn't compete on footprint or overall thickness, it embraces a boxier aesthetic by riffing on last year's DeLorean-inspired G5 vent design and adds a little flair by throwing some ultramarine blue thermal-management components behind a perspex undercarriage vent.

There's a bit of back and forth in this unit, which seems torn between wanting to be one of the most premium devices available and trying to meet market demands. See while the G5 15 unit we tested had just a Nvidia RTX 2060 GPU, it had also been fitted with a pair of 512GB NVMe drives in a RAID 0 configuration for 2700+MB/s read and write speeds. We were supportive of this feature on MSI's $4,800 GS75, but it's a little silly to think that you'd pay for this extravagant speed bump on the G5 15 when you could get the ROG Zephyrus S GX531 with an RTX 2070 for less.

The CPU performed within 5% of the average across all the general work and direct processing benchmarks and while it was generally about 15% lower than the average framerates in the roundup on graphical tasks, we did pit it against more powerful 2070s and 2080s. This translates to framerate averages of 56 and 41.33 on games like The Division 2 and Ghost Recon: Wildlands using Ultra 1080p settings, respectively.

Dell has somehow managed to squeeze 5 hours and 14 minutes out of a generous 90Wh battery when under PCMark's Home battery life benchmark load, a result so surprising we had to run it twice.

VERDICT: **Great battery life and awesome design are marred by unusually premium components and a higher than expected price tag.**

8

RTX 2060

Metabox Alpha-X NH58ED

Does this budget offering manage to be more than just another RTX box?

PRICE $2,203
metabox.com.au

If you've read up on ray tracing then you'd know it's a rather demanding technological leap. This might make it debatable about whether to bother looking at the lower end of RTX cards when you can nab an older laptop with a more powerful GTX card on a solid discount. We're not going to argue with this logic, but if there was a device that made a compelling case for a budget RTX gaming laptop it's the Metabox Alpha-X NH58ED. While this unit's full RRP is $2,603, you can get it on sale for as little as $2,203, which is really just a couple of hundred more than what you would expect to pay for a light gaming laptop with a mid-range Nvidia GPU. For this you get an Intel Core i7-8750 CPU, 16GB of RAM, a Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060 GPU, a 500GB SATA 3 SSD, and a 15.6-inch 144Hz IPS display. As far as regular work and home office tasks go, this laptop is as good as any here, keeping well within 5% of the average benchmark scores for CPU heavy tasks. If we turn our sights to gaming, the Metabox Alpha-X NH58ED was able to get framerate averages above 70fps on Far Cry Primal and Middle Earth: Shadow of War, above 60fps on the Division 2 and was between 8 and 14% behind the 2070 average across all games. This unit does take a hit in battery and it doesn't have a particularly unique chassis, but it offers a lot for the price.

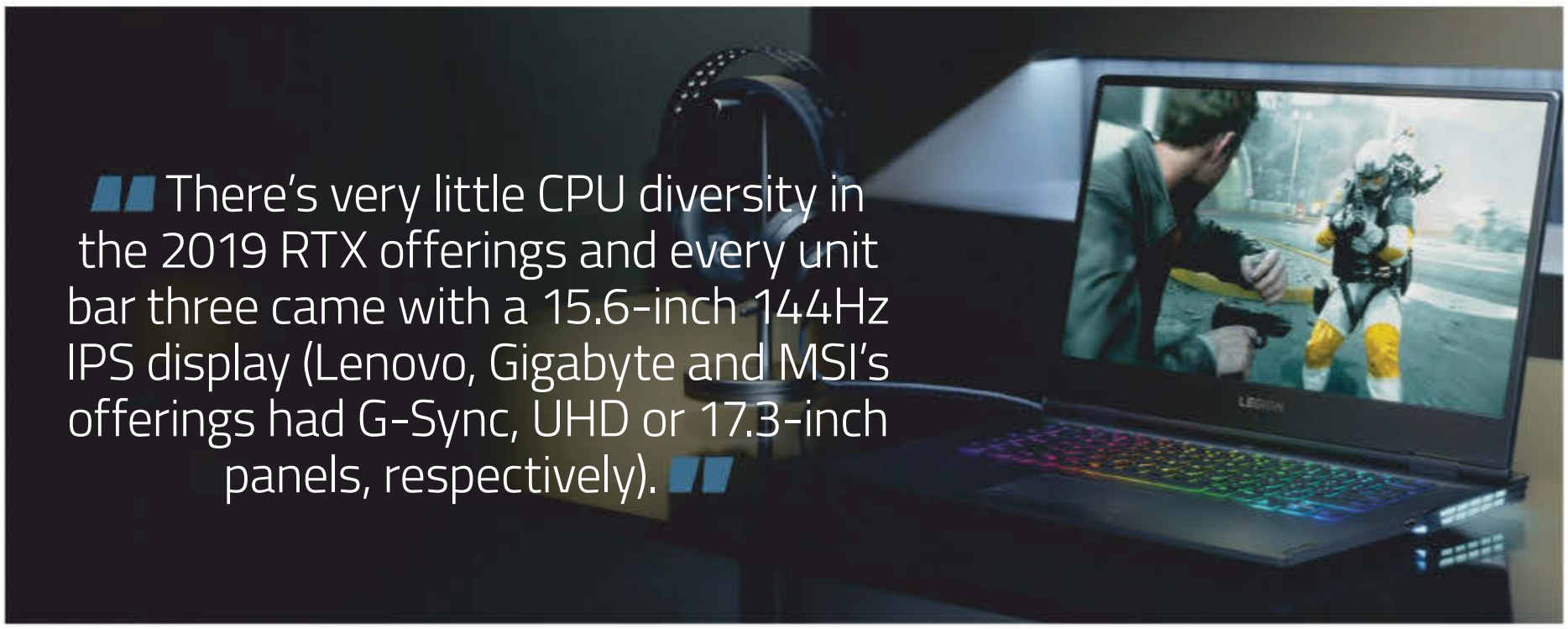
VERDICT: **The Metabox Alpha-X is an entry level RTX unit that looks a little frumpy, but offers solid performance and is great value when on sale.**

9

RTX GAMING LAPTOP BENCHMARKS

Indicates Best Result

	PCMark 8- Home (accelerated)	PCMark 8- Home Battery (accelerated)	Crystal DiskMark 5/6- Sequential read (Q32T1)	Crystal DiskMark 5/6- Sequential write (Q32T1)	Cinebench R15- CPU (multi-threaded)	Cinebench R15- CPU (single-core)	Peak CPU temperature (°C)	3DMark (2013)- Time Spy	3DMark (2013)- Port Royal (ray tracing)	The Division 2 - 1080p, Ultra (avg/ low fps)	Ghost Recon Wildlands - 1080p, Ultra (avg/ low fps)
Metabox Alpha-X NH58ED	4192	01:41	519.6	508.8	1139	174	97	5,609	2,917	64	44.8
Aftershock Apex 15 x	3970	02:05	1996.0	1669.9	1250	170	97	5,839	3,043	69	47.16
Dell G5 15	3922	05:14	3026.7	2699.2	1218	168	100	5,842	3055	56	41.33
Asus ROG Strix Scar II GL504	3954	01:53	1606.8	1028	1235	170	97	5,646	3010	DNT	44.3
Lenovo Legion Y740 (15)	4731	01:34	3357	1669	1212	173	99	6,418	DNT	76	47.73
Asus ROG Zephyrus S GX531	3963	02:17	1709.2	955.1	1094	173	96	6,372	3,515	68.00	47.88
Gigabyte Aero 15 X9 (i7)	3324	02:50	2753	1519.8	1058	159	94	6,237	3577		51
MSI GS 75 Stealth 8SG	4061	03:18	3454.9	3407.4	1067	169	99	6,911		82	53
Razer Blade 2019	3980	01:45	3191.3	1816.4	967	173	97	7,108	4,227	88	57.03
Alienware m15	4010	02:10	2647	611.8	1214	171	100	7,663	4369	74.00	56.32



"There's very little CPU diversity in the 2019 RTX offerings and every unit bar three came with a 15.6-inch 144Hz IPS display (Lenovo, Gigabyte and MSI's offerings had G-Sync, UHD or 17.3-inch panels, respectively)."

RTX GAMING LAPTOP SPECIFICATIONS

	CPU	Memory	GPU	Storage 1	Stor-age 2	Screen size	Screen type	Resolution	Screen finish	Battery capacity	Dimen-sions (mm)	Thickness	Weight
Metabox Alpha-X NH58ED	Intel Core i7-8750H	16GB	2060 (Nvidia GeForce RTX)	500GB SATA 3 SSD	NA	15.6-inch	144Hz	1920x1080	Matte	48Wh	361 x 258 x 27.9	2.8cm	2.2kg
Aftershock Apex 15 x	Intel Core i7-8750H	16GB	2060 (Nvidia GeForce RTX)	512 M.2 PCIe SSD	1TB HDD	15.6-inch	144Hz	1920x1080	Matte	46.7Wh	359 x 240 x 19.9	2cm	1.95kg
Dell G5 15	Intel Core i7-8750H	16GB	2060 (Nvidia GeForce RTX)	512GB NVMe PCIe SSD (RAID 0)	NA	15.6-inch	60Hz	1920x1080	Matte	90Wh	364.3 x 273.4 x 23.7	2.4cm	2.68kg
Asus ROG Strix Scar II GL504	Intel Core i7-8750H	16GB	2060 (Nvidia GeForce RTX)	512MB Kingston M.2 NVMe SSD	NA	15.6-inch	144Hz	1920 x 1080	Matte	66Wh	361 x 262 x 26.1	2.61cm	2.4kg
Lenovo Legion Y740 (15)	Intel Core i7-8750H	16GB	2070 (Max-Q) Nvidia GeForce RTX	256GB NVMe PCIe SSD	1TB HDD	15.6-inch	144Hz	1920x1080	Matte	57Wh	361 x 265 x 23.85	2.4cm	2.2kg
Asus ROG Zephyrus S GX531	Intel Core i7-8750H	16GB	2070 (Max-Q) Nvidia GeForce RTX	512GB NVMe SSD	NA	15.6-inch	144Hz	1920x1080	Matte	63.8Wh	360 x 258 x 15.35	1.5cm	2.1kg
Gigabyte Aero 15 X9 (i7)	Core i7-8750H	16GB	2070 (Max-Q) Nvidia GeForce RTX	1TB Intel NVMe PCIe SSD	NA	15.6-inch	144Hz IPS or UHD	1920 x 1080 or 3840 x 2160 (16:9)	Matte	94.2Wh	356.4 x 250 x 18.9	1.9cm	2.11kg
MSI GS 75 Stealth 8SG	Intel Core i7-8750H	32GB	2080 (Max-Q) Nvidia GeForce RTX	1TB NVMe PCIe SSD (RAID 0)	NA	17.3-inch	144Hz	1920x1080	Matte	80Wh	396.1 x 259.5 x 18.95	1.9cm	2.25kg
Razer Blade 2019	Intel Core i7-8750H	16GB	2080 (Max-Q) Nvidia GeForce RTX	512GB NVMe PCIe SSD	NA	15.6-inch	144Hz	1920x1080	Matte	80Wh Li-I	355 x 235 x 17.8	1.8cm	2.1kg
Alienware m15	Intel Core i7-8750H	16GB	2080 (Max-Q) Nvidia GeForce RTX	512GB NVMe SSD	1TB Hybrid SSHD Drive	15.6-inch	144Hz	1920x1080	Matte	60Wh	363 x 275 x 21	2.1cm	2.16kg

ASUS and AMD

THE BEST MATCH FOR YOUR GAMING PC.

ASUS is a market leader in PC gaming hardware and devices. Whether you're after a powerful new laptop for gaming on the go, or the ultimate tower to dominate from home, ASUS has you covered. By partnering with AMD, ASUS can offer unique features to push your gaming rig further, with potential for overclocking, easy drive management, the best sound system possible, as well as full Aura Sync support. Here are some of the best features available from ASUS and AMD, and how to get the most out of your rig with them.

ASUS PROCLOCK TECHNOLOGY REVEALS THE TRUE POWER OF THE AMD RYZEN PROCESSOR

ASUS' ProClock is a base-clock generator that lets you push the frequency of your CPU to new heights, allowing you to experiment with overclocking your PC to get the best performance possible out of your AMD Ryzen processor. Overclocking is an important rite of passage for most PC enthusiasts when they're testing out their new or improved rig, and discovering the potential of your new processor can be a true thrill. With the ROG Crosshair VII Hero motherboard, you can unlock the full potential of your Ryzen CPU and really show off what it can do. All the Ryzen's major bus frequencies are derived from the same reference clock, which can make overclocking tricky under some circumstances. But the Crosshair VII Hero features a dedicated onboard clock generator, which can be used to great effect with the Ryzen, making overclocking easy. It supplies dynamic clock references to the CPU cores and major subdomains, meaning that you'll be able to squeeze every MHz out of your processor. ASUS' ProClock Technology is the ideal match for AMD's Ryzen processor, and will let you get the absolute most out of your PC.

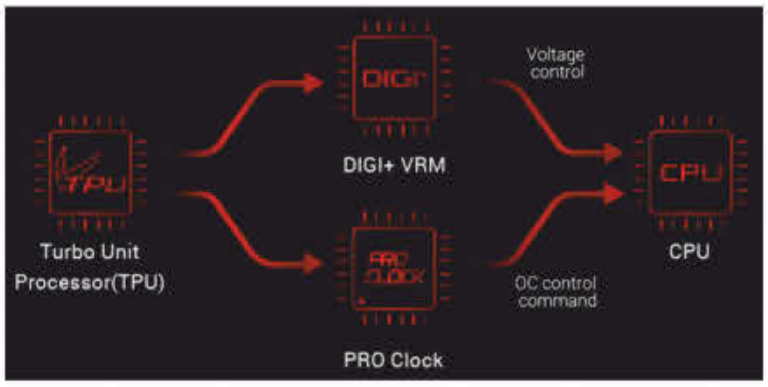
Asus boasts a full range of Ryzen-ready motherboards.

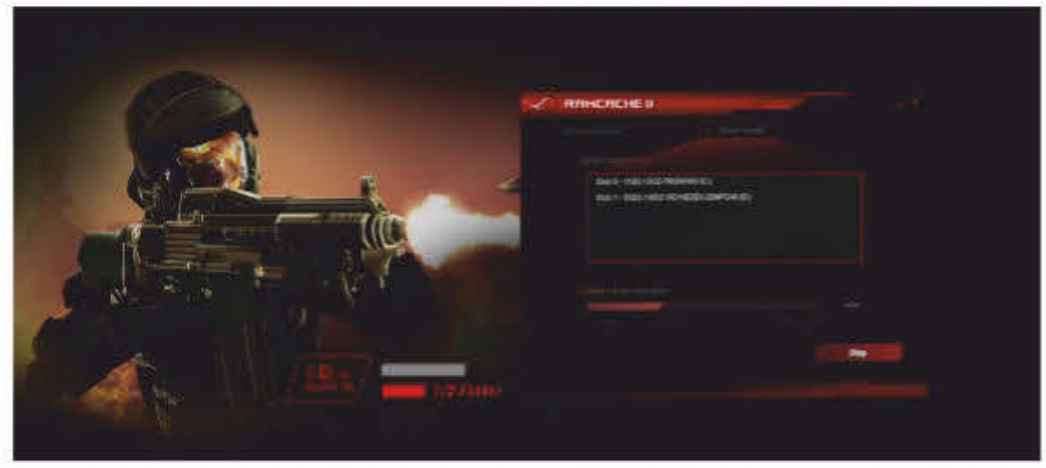
AMD'S STOREMI AND ASUS RAMCACHE II COMBINES SSD SPEED WITH HARD DRIVE CAPACITY

In an ideal world, you'd boot every game from your SSD: they're so much faster, but the lower storage and higher costs make it impractical to store your games on them compared to HDDs, especially with soaring file sizes. But with AMD and ASUS, you can have the best of both worlds. AMD's StoreMI technology lets you combine the speed of your HDD with the capacity of your SSD, allowing you to operate them as though they were a single drive. This makes for a system that's easier to manage and faster to operate, with faster load times across the board. ASUS' RAMCache II lets you take things even further by using the system memory as a cache. This lets you boost reload times significantly, and ASUS' RAMCache II software can dramatically increase the speed of your loads and transfers from your HDD. In tests, with RAMCache II enabled data transfers happened faster and with greater stability - a 6GB file can be transferred in 30 seconds instead of a minute, for instance. The combination of AMD's StoreMI technology and RamCache II will give you load speeds well beyond what would normally be possible.

UPGRADE YOUR RAID ARRAY WITH THE HYPER M.2X16

This one's for the really dedicated computer enthusiasts who are looking for a way to boost their rig and get the best performance out of it imaginable. By upgrading the RAID array in your PC, you can combine multiple drives for incredible





throughput, giving you a true beast of a machine. Putting together an NVMe SSD set-up is something for the real hardcore PC user, and while it's rare for PCs to offer more than one M.2 slot, ASUS and AMD allow you to take things to the next level. AMD supports flexible combinations, letting you form an NVMe RAID over PCIe lanes from both your CPU and chipsets, boosting your PC's capabilities. With ASUS, you can take things even further thanks to the Hyper M.2x16 expansion card. By supporting this card, ASUS allows you to expand with up to four additional NVMe per card. You can RAID these with your motherboard's M.2 ports for a truly amazing performance.

RAMCache II boosts the load times on your games.

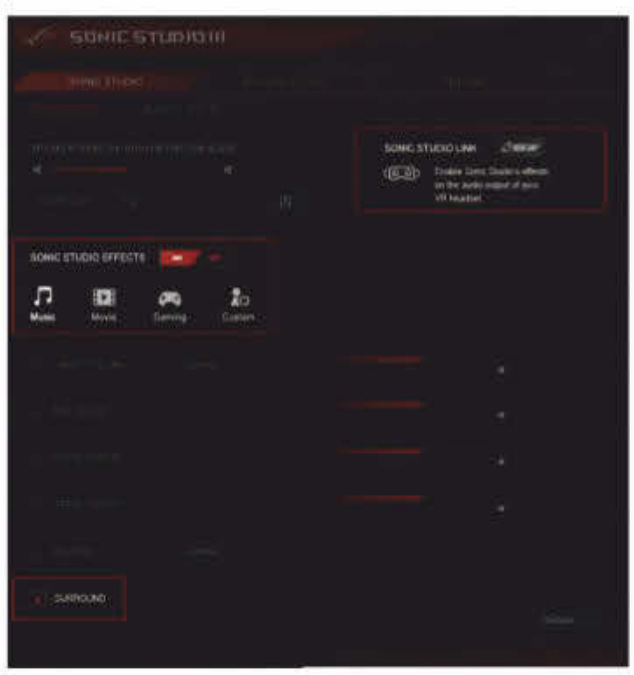
THE BEST AUDIO EXPERIENCE

ASUS understands the importance of good audio for the best gaming experience. A powerful sound card that allows for effective audio positioning and the ability to customise your experience can strengthen a game's impact beyond what is possible with a lesser set-up. ASUS' custom SupremeFX 1220 Audio CODEC + ESS SABRE ES9023 DAC is designed to give you a perfect, flexible sound experience, pushing the limits of what onboard audio can do. The custom Sonic Studio software is a full audio suite that offers a huge range of audio controls. You're given control over smart volume, bass boost, treble boost, voice clarity, reverb and surround options, giving you a great deal of control over your sound experience. Some of the other, more advanced features allow for EQ options, mapping different audio to different outputs, and more, allowing for deep customisation and complete control. ASUS also knows that there are little things – like the 'bang' noise that comes from switching off or unplugging your headphones and speakers – that can irritate, but thanks to the system's additional relay circuits even that's a thing of the past.

Sonic Studio III delivers the best sound, with complete control.

CUSTOMISE YOUR OWN LIGHT SHOW

Your ASUS motherboard comes equipped with the distinctive Aura Sync lighting solution. Thanks to Aura Sync, you can turn your PC into a proper light show, with colour profiles based on what games you're playing, what time of day it is, and other variables. Your ASUS motherboard can synchronise with the RGB LEDs inside your system, and all your different Aura Sync parts and products can be synced together for a single glorious display. You can even sync it up with supporting smart light devices, including the popular Philips Hue, and extend the light show beyond your computer. Aura Sync's reactive lights can enhance your experience further, and can make your PC look even more amazing.



MONITOR

Acer Predator XB273P Monitor

144Hz refresh rate, at 4K, with an IPS panel? No, it's not a dream!

PRICE $1,999
acer.com.au

Acer's had a good run with its Predator displays, releasing some truly excellent gaming monitors to the market such as the X34 and X34P. The 27-inch XB273KP is Acer's latest addition to the Predator range, packing UHD 4K, IPS, DisplayHDR 400 certification, Nvidia G-Sync and a 144Hz refresh rate, making it worthy of the Predator branding.

Let's start this review by looking at the exterior of the XB273KP, because it comes with a rather unique feature not normally seen on gaming monitors – a hood. If you've hung around professional photographers or graphic designers, you might have noticed a plastic frame around their displays to keep stray sources of light away and maintain colour accuracy. But on the XB273KP, Acer claims the hood is there so you can focus on your game. Like a horse on a racetrack wearing blinkers, I guess? Luckily, the hood is removable.

The included stand is solid and allows for a good range of adjustments to suit your preferred ergonomics. The stand is kitted out with LEDs that can project a cool user-configurable glow onto your desk and there's even a little latch on the back of the stand that when pulled down, is a spot to store your headphones. If you need more adjustment than the stand provides, there's a VESA mount in the box you can use to attach the XB273KP to any stand you like.

As soon as the XB273KP is powered up, a small fan turns on to keep the monitor's internals cool. It makes sense a fan would kick in at 120Hz or 144Hz as the display processing hardware is working hard, but at a regular 60Hz for desktop use, the fan can be annoying in a quiet room. In an ideal world Acer would have configured the fan to only run at high temperatures.

Putting aside the XB273KP's quirks, it's a damn fine monitor. Thanks to the IPS panel, colour accuracy is well above most traditional gaming monitors with TN or VA-type panels, providing 90% coverage of the DCI-P3 colour gamut. IPS panels are normally shunned by gamers as there's a trade-off between colour accuracy and high refresh rates, but Acer's pulled a rabbit out of their hat and provided the best of both worlds – high colour accuracy and high refresh rates of 120Hz and 144Hz with Nvidia G-Sync support to keep everything smooth as butter. Even more amazing is that the XB237KP does all this at 3840 x 2160!

The catch for all this amazing performance is price. The XB273KP retails for $1,999. That's a lot of coin for a monitor and unfortunately out of the price range of most gamers and other enthusiasts. That said, if you can afford a rig that can actually achieve 120fps or 144fps at 3840 x 2160, maybe $2,000 for a monitor is no big deal. Not buying the XB273KP to go with your dual RTX 2080 Ti GPUs in SLI would be like owning a Ferrari and getting a set of $90 eco tyres – pretty stupid.

ANTHONY AGIUS PC

> **"Acer's pulled a rabbit out of their hat and provided the best of both worlds – high colour accuracy and high refresh rates of 120Hz and 144Hz."**

+
- So many great features in one package
- Excellent display quality

–
- Just a bit beyond affordable for most of us.

VERDICT: **While there's no denying this is one of the best monitors on the market today, there's also no denying it's fiendishly expensive. Only you can judge if it's worth it.**

9

CASE

MSI MPG Gungnir 100 PC case

BEHOLD! MIGHTY... Gungnir?

PRICE $159
www.msi.com

MSI is not normally a name that I'd leap to when it came to choosing a PC case for a new build, but the hardware company is continuing to branch out, and while its new MGP Gungnir 100 case may not boast a name that rolls off the tongue, it certainly makes an impact. This is a roomy case, able to house an E-ATX motherboards if size really is your thing, but it also has a few other tricks up its rather expansive sleeves...

Now, if you really don't give a damn about the continuing dominance of RGB lighting as a feature of modern PC hardware, the Gungnir is going to be basically yawn-worthy, as many those tricks related to ARGB lighting effects. Inside is an addressable RGB-lit fan (at the rear, as the three front fans are hidden behind the front fascia), and a one-to-eight ARGB hub, so you can plug in more RGB components such as light strips. This hub can be controlled by a single button alongside the rest of the case's buttons – by holding it down for three seconds you can cycle through seven preset effects, and of course the case can sync up with MSI's own Mystic Light software for a truly coordinated lightshow.

There are also lighting strips at the top and bottom of the aggressively angled front fascia, and there are two inset logo-blocks that also light up to match your case's disco effects. These are even neater than they first appear, as these parts can be swapped out for custom, 3D printed logos. Got an esports team you follow, or a favourite gaming logo? Print it out, and your case can become a one of a kind work of art. The bottom logo is also designed to reflect on whatever surface your case is resting on.

Nice touch.

Lighting may not be your thing, but the Gungnir does have more to offer. Cable management has very cleverly handled by a large range of rubber-grommeted cable runs, and removable metal shroud behind the motherboard plate adorned with Velcro tabs. This keeps every out of the way, improving airflow and general looks, which will matter given the tempered glass sidepanel, itself anchored by sturdy thumb screws and backed by rubber seats. If you take full advantage of all the interior assets of this case, you'll have one striking build. Storage leans toward SSD drives, with four brackets overall, and two 5.25in drive bays.

Cooling, out of the box, is similarly impressive. Three 120mm fans draw air in, while a single fan handles exhaust. This leads to positive interior air pressure, which will help keep dust and other particulates out of the interior. If you want to go liquid, there's heaps of room for just about any liquid cooling option you can think of.

"Cable management has very cleverly handled by a large range of rubber-grommeted cable runs, and removable metal shroud behind the motherboard plate adorned with Velcro tabs."

For the asking price the features are top notch, though removable dust filters would have been nice, as they're becoming common on far cheaper cases. Otherwise, MSI's foray into case design is looking strong out of the gate.

DAVID HOLLINGWORTH PC

+
- Roomy interior
- Well-integrated lighting
- Great cooling

-
- Lacking dust filters

VERDICT: **An excellent effort that hits almost every possible mark for not an exorbitant asking price. Well done MSI.**

9

GAMING MOUSE

Razer Basilisk Essential

A less expensive version of the Basilisk that's almost as good.

PRICE $79.95
www2.razer.com

Take about $50 off Razer's old Basilisk and you arrive at the Basilisk Essential. It still has Chroma, it still has the exact same design, removable paddle and Razer's mechanical mice switches.

You don't lose a lot, either. You only have a single removable paddle, there's no choice in length anymore, but it's still customizable. My personal favorite for this is as a push to talk shortcut for Discord chat, but FPS fans will appreciate applying DPI shift to it, slowing your DPI right down for those sniping situations.

The gaming-grade sensor has a lower DPI at 6,400 compared to 16,000 on the regular model, but for most that will still be plenty for most. It's not Razer's 5G optical sensor, but it's still very good. It tracks well and is super responsive. And, like the regular Basilisk, the Essential has 1000 Hz Ultrapolling.

Using the Basilisk Essential is like gliding across a sheet of ice.

However, the Basilisk Essential houses a bunch of great hardware. The scroll wheel has a nice tactile feel to it and the rubber grips on each outer edge ensure a firm hold in the heat of battle.

Despite being a fairly chunky mouse, the Basilisk Essential is extremely light. Paired with the thumb grip keeping your digit away from the mouse pad you get minimal drag and a really agile mouse as you're flying around the mouse pad. I've been using the Basilisk Essential in conjunction with a Razer Goliathus mousepad and I can only liken the experience to sliding across a smooth sheet of ice.

It's exquisite.

The Basilisk Essential also benefits from Synapse 3 support, which is good for not only syncing your lighting, but getting the most from the mouse. It's where you'll assign dedicated functions or macros to your mouse buttons, as well as setting up your DPI stages and more.

Despite not being quite as advanced as its sibling, there's no doubting that the Basilisk Essential is a truly outstanding gaming mouse.

There's not a whole lot to dislike, just as with the regular Basilisk. Perhaps the biggest criticism is the exclusively right-handed design. Most mice are still geared towards right-handers, but there's no left-handed version of the Basilisk Essential at this time.

It's also only available in wired form, which is fine, but the USB cable doesn't detach at all. When you're at your desk that's not a problem, but if you're a laptop gamer on the go, being able to pull it out and stow it separately would have been a nice touch.

> **"Using the Basilisk Essential is like gliding across a sheet of ice."**

There's also no onboard storage on the Basilisk Essential, which considering a fairly small price decrease is all you get over the regular model we'd have like to have seen included.

The Basilisk is an almost perfect gaming mouse, and the Basilisk Essential is nearly as good. If you're happy with the compromises, it's hard to find a better mouse for the cost right now.

RICHARD DEVINE PC

+
- Extremely comfortable
- Responsive optical sensor
- Great price

–
- No left-handed version
- No detachable USB cable

VERDICT: **Almost as good as the regular Basilisk but with a more wallet-friendly price.**

9

PROJECTOR

Asus F1 Full HD LED Projector

The F1 is capable of transforming regular TV and gaming into a genuine cinematic experience — even in a small room.

PRICE $1,699
www.asus.com/au/

The prospect of reviewing a projector has not been particularly enticing for some years now. In a world where large, high-quality TVs are ubiquitous and low in price, the notion of having a tricky-to-setup, washed-out image delivered by a an expensive, high-maintenance device that's not usable in daylight hours is something that only a Transylvanian Count might be interested in. But, Asus' F1 projector turned our heads.

Firstly, it's a short-throw model, meaning that it can produce a large, undistorted image from close range. It also eschews an expensive, consumable lamp for an LED lighting array that's capable of producing 1,200 LUMENs of brightness for 30,000 hours. There's no need to awkwardly attach separate speakers thanks to a built-in Harmon Kardon-certified 2.1 system, and focusing and keystone effects are adjusted automatically. It all comes in a small, 1.85KG package with carrying case (and chunky power adapter).

The F1 projects a 25inch image when 43cm from a wall while full, 210inch tumescence is achieved at just 3.7m thanks to the 0.8:1 throw ratio. Our test household is well used to high-quality large TVs but moving to a 150inch display instantly transformed lounge-room viewing into a genuine, cinematic experience. Our resident kids instantly fell in love with it and constantly demanded to watch more.

We tested on a bright(ish) Autumnal afternoon with all blinds closed. There was still significant light-leakage which washed out the image but it was still watchable. There's only an 800:1 contrast ratio but we were never expecting OLED-levels of true-black performance. Nonetheless, we were impressed that letterbox bars were barely perceptible: there's little light leakage and blacks weren't as washed out as expected.

We transmitted TV and movies via Chromecast Ultra to one of the two HDMI ports. Naturally, colour vibrancy didn't approach TV quality but then neither does an actual cinema nowadays. The darker a room got, the more colourful the viewing became but, frankly, the awe-inspiring picture size meant everyone was very forgiving of picture quality. While you could make out pixels in areas of uniform colour (like cartoons) they weren't distracting and we didn't miss our TV's 4K resolution.

Asus' F1 moniker denotes that the projector is good for gaming and it generally is. While input lag might be a factor for hardened beat-em up players, more-casual games saw no issues. Playing in a bright(ish) room meant that foggy scenes could become challenging but they never felt unplayable. Dropping the resolution to 720p enables 120Hz refresh rates for fast-and-frantic shooters. The built-in speakers take a little getting used to because sound comes from behind (or beside) you. However, they offer similar loudness and punch to premium TVs. Our only real downside was the infra-red remote, which is laggy and unresponsive — but you don't need it much. At $1,699 it represents reasonable value and will make a sizeable, niche audience think twice about buying a similarly-priced 65-inch 4K TV — especially considering that this can be easily be stowed, slipped into a backpack or transferred between rooms.

"The F1 projects a 25inch image when 43cm from a wall while full, 210inch tumescence is achieved at just 3.7m..."

NICK ROSS PC

+
- Impressive short-throw capability
- Still looks good with a larger image
- A good gaming alternative

−
- The remote is a bit dinky.

VERDICT: **Whether used for presentations, TV or gaming, this portable projector enhances the experience.**

8

ADVERTORIAL

Keeping Cool In Style With Thermaltake Cases, Fans and Liquid Cooling

EVEN AS THE WEATHER OUTSIDE COOLS DOWN IN AUSTRALIA, THERE'S ONE PLACE WHERE TEMPERATURES CAN KEEP RISING – INSIDE YOUR PC.

An overheating PC can be a disaster – it leads to unexpected shutdowns, the parts can warp, and permanent damage can be done. To avoid this, you need a case with a superior airflow solution, plenty of room for fans and, if you're running a real beast of a machine, a full liquid cooling solution.

Thermaltake's got you covered, with the best range of products for anyone looking to put together or upgrade a PC with the best in airflow and cooling solutions. Its new range of cases, the Commander C series, is designed with airflow in mind. These sleek, smart cases look fantastic, and they're designed to last and adapt, no matter what changes you might want to make to the innards of your system in the future. For a full cooling solution, though, you'll also want to check out Thermaltake's Pure ARGB fans and its Water 3.0 ARGB CPU Liquid Cooler, too. Whether you just want to run the latest games or you're putting together an absolute performance beast, it's important to consider the best cooling set-up for what you need.

The impact of good airflow cannot be overstated. It will prevent your PC from getting clogged with dust and will protect your parts for their entire lifespan. A well-ventilated PC will last much longer than a PC that gets clogged up and overheated. The Commander C cases also feature a 4mm tempered glass side panel to show off your parts and help you keep an eye on how everything is performing. These panels are designed to be durable and scratch-resistant, so if you often travel with your PC you don't need to worry about it getting dinged.

> The Commander C series consists of six distinct designs, depending on your front panel preference.

TAKE COMMAND

With the Commander C case range, Thermaltake gives its users an extremely generous build space, with plenty of room for whatever you want to put in there. This is a roomy case, one that makes it easy to swap parts, manage cables, and keep everything protected. Even for the expert tinkerers out there, building your own PC can be a fiddly business, and if the case doesn't have the capacity to house all the beautiful, often very expensive parts you want to house in it, then it's not doing you any favours - but that won't be an issue with these cases.

The Commander C series consists of six distinct designs, depending on your front panel preference. The C31-36 are all available with a bold black finish, while the C31 and c34 are also available in bright white 'snow' variants, if that's your preferred aesthetic. This makes for eight beautiful cases to choose between, with Thermaltake making sure to cover all bases and cater to all tastes. The front panels are a mesh design, which means that you'll be able to get fantastic airflow filtration through them, keeping your PC from overheating. Each case comes preinstalled with dual built-in hydraulic bearing 200mm 5V ARGB case front fans, each featuring nine addressable LEDs, making for an elegant, colourful cooling solution. There's a 120mm standard rear fan included too, and room at the front for up to two 200mm, two 140mm,

BELOW: Mesh vents on the C series help improve airflow and keep your case clean.

BELOW LEFT: Behind the vents are a pair of 200mm ARGB fans.

Advanced RGB lighting looks striking on its own, but the C series can also link up with hardware you've got installed for a dazzling light display.

or three 120mm fans, as well as room for two 140mm fans on top.

When you're looking to fill those fan spaces, Thermaltake's Pure ARGB Sync Fans are the perfect solution. Not only are they designed to last, built with compression blades and hydraulic bearings for superior performance, but they look super stylish thanks to their custom lighting options. With a tap on the RGB button on the Commander C's I/O interface panel, you can switch the lights on your fans between seven different lighting modes - flow mode, RGB lighting, radar mode, breath mode, full lighted mode, single colour, or turn them off entirely.

KEEP IT COOL

Open your Commander C up and your options for cooling expand even further. There's room for radiators and reservoirs inside these cases, along with just about anything else you might want to install. Each case is Tt LCS certified - the Thermaltake exclusive certification that can be applied to products that meet the highest possible standards for liquid cooling support compatibility. They also allow for two-way radiator mounting of up to 360mm, so you can build the cooling solution that best suits your needs. There's room for a CPU cooler of any height up to 180mm, a dual expansion slot VGA of up to 310mm, and a power supply up to 200mm.

This means that you can outfit your case with the Thermaltake Water 3.0 ARGB CPU Liquid Cooler, the all-in-one liquid cooling solution designed to cool down even the most hardcore of PCs. It comes in three sizes – the 120 ARGB Sync Edition with one 120 mm fan, the 240 ARGB Sync Edition with two 120 mm fans, and the 360 ARGB Sync Edition with three 120 mm fans – any of which will happily fit inside the Commander C. The large surface area of the Water 3.0 ARGB series increases your cooling power and will dissipate heat with amazing efficiency, while the high-performance copper base waterblock plate will accelerate heat conductivity.

Tempered glass panels let you show off your PC hardware in perfect style.

Thermaltake's range of airflow and cooling solutions means never needing to worry about whether you're running too hot. With its eight unique designs, mesh front for easy airflow, ample space for fans and cooling solutions, and an easy-access RGB button, the Commander C case range is the perfect, cool case for your rig. Pair it with the Pure ARGB fans on the front or top, as well as the Water 3.0 ARGB CPU Liquid Cooler, and you'll have a rig that will always keep cool - no matter how hard you push it.

The impact of good airflow cannot be overstated. It will prevent your PC from getting clogged with dust and will protect your parts for their entire lifespan.

THE THIRD PLACE: HOW INTEL'S 386 MADE US REALISE PC GAMING WOULD BE A THING

With hindsight, it seems obvious that the creation of the (semi)open "IBM PC" standard would eventually lead to personal machines powerful enough to run, say, Skyrim. But at the time, the future - indeed the very existence of - PC gaming was anything but assured.

These days of course, there are basically two types of personal computer - PCs and Macs. And in 2006, Apple embraced Intel's (near) monopoly on PC architecture and switched away from PowerPC CPUs to Core-whatevers. The phrase "IBM PC" might have become socially obsolete years earlier, but its victory over end-user multipurpose desktop computing was now absolute.

What's interesting about Steve Jobs' 2006 announcement is that it implies Apple probably made the decision at least a year earlier... and 2005 marked the 20th anniversary of the release of the Intel 80386.

Also known as the i386 (after various copyright courts ruled that Intel could no longer register numbers as a trademark) or colloquially to the likes of us as the 386, this 32-bit CPU dropped in October 1985 and changed probably more than is usually acknowledged.

THREE WAYS TO PLAY

This is because the 386 marked the first time somebody other than IBM made a significant hardware upgrade to the IBM-PC standard. That somebody was Compaq, first to market with a 386-based PC.

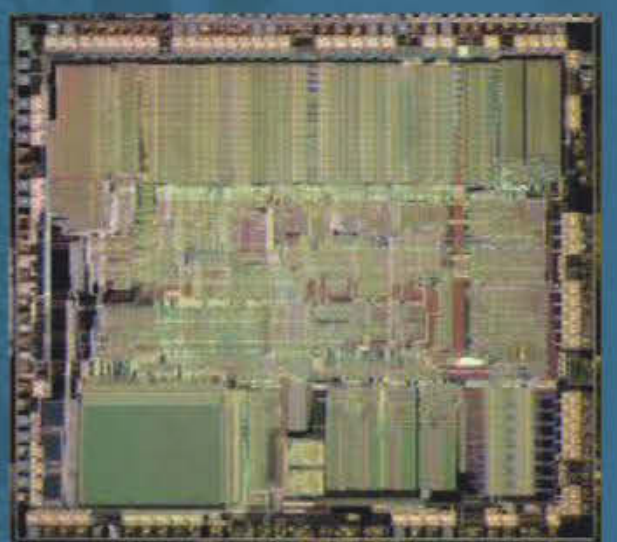
It was also the first 32-bit PC CPU, though you might have a dim memory of it only being 16-bit. That's because to offer home users a cheaper, simpler platform, Intel later created the 386SX - it was still a 32-bit CPU on the inside, but only communicated with the rest of the machine over a 16-bit bus. Intel rebranded its full-32-bit CPU the 386DX... setting everyone up for some lovely confusion when the 486SX/DX came along (because for those chips, SX/DX indicated the absence or presence of a floating-point unit - see PCPP#272).

The extent to which you care that the 386 had a paging translation unit to support operating systems that use virtual memory, protected mode capable of addressing 4GB of RAM (not that anyone could afford that much), and its ability to work as if it had a flat-memory model, is probably proportional to how much electrical engineering you've studied. So take it as read that all these things were important milestones for PC hardware.

(Also, that 4GB isn't a typo. Yes, actual home computers at the time had only 2MB - megabytes - of RAM, but the 386 was intended for hardcore implementations....)

THREE PCS FOR THE PRICE OF... STILL A CAR

More than all of this though, the 386 did two major things - it was built into systems that were vaguely affordable ($5000 instead of $10,000), and those systems could be upgraded in an almost contemporary amount of ways. Video subsystem, hard drives, various disk drives, networking, it all started to appear thanks to the 386.



▲ The die of the humble but oh-so-vital 386 processor.

This was the platform that supported VGA and SuperVGA video modes. This was the platform that could play Wing Commander in 1990, and was in a huge number of homes by the time Doom came along in 1993. Sure, a 386DX could only really handle Doom in low-detail mode (this is real, there really was a low-detail mode) but the point is it COULD handle it.

The 286 before it was hugely expensive, and only spawned the most basic and simplistic of games. Of course, the way these x86 CPUs are all backwards compatible means games written

▲ Only the cool and slightly weird kids had an Amiga.

▲ You think Windows 3.1 looks bad - it ran worse!

▲ "RAMMING SPEED!"

This was what it was all about - getting Wing Commander running and looking good.

END OF A SURPRISINGLY LONG ERA

So of course the 80386 must have gone the same way of all the other ancient chips, discounted by Intel in the long-ago before-time of... September 2007?!

This is because Intel provided the chip for use in so-called "embedded systems" rather than personal computers. The military in particular liked the 80386, because it remained usefully powerful and extremely tough and cheap. It even appeared (in a highly customisable form) in the BlackBerry 950 and Nokia 9000 Communicator mobile phones.

Nowadays of course we have "system on a chip" units, application-specific integrated circuits, and field-programmable gate arrays. So at last, the doughty 80386 can rest.

PC hardware sure was... green in the good old days.

on 386s could work on 286s... badly... but it took the sheer grunt of the 386 to inspire developers to get busy.

OPENING THE THIRD SEAL

The 386 gave us the first golden age of PC gaming. Because it was the first time that games built for multiple platforms - as many still were - looked their best on PC. PC had the most RAM, the most video memory, and the most powerful CPUs. All for a price, sure, but these things existed. And our platform was their home.

Competitors in the late 1980s included Apple, of course, but also the likes of Amiga, Atari (yes, the Atari ST was a PC), Amstrad, and even Australia's own Microbee a little bit.

The Amiga in particular gave both Apple and the IBM-PC clones a run for their money when it came to graphics and sound.

The Amiga 1000 had arrived just a few months earlier in July 1985 (reminder: the 386 was October) with a frankly amazing graphics and audio system. With its Windows-lite OS, vibrant game pirating community, and sleek design, it was a slam-dunk over any 286-based PC you could get, and left the Apple IIc looking like a weird piece of medical equipment.

And sure, for at least the next couple of years, we'd battle in the schoolyard over "IBM" vs "Amiga" while the Atari ST guys muttered in the dustier corners about how the Atari TT would blow us all away... until they found out how much it would cost.

THREE LITTLE LETTERS

Part of the reason the Amiga 1000 and even the later-but-less-powered Amiga 500 maintained their reputation among the kinds of folks who would eventually become major Sega Master System stans, was that the proliferating number of 386 "clones" ran on DOS. In the late 1990s, Windows was still a horrible nightmare.

Windows 3.1, for instance, came on six 3.5inch floppy disks and seemed to exist purely to make your expensive new 386 run a lot worse.

Games were launched from the command line, which probably made it seem to non-PC users that our beloved machines had more in common with the Commodore 64 (which had no GUI at all... or at least none worth speaking of) than Commodore's own Amiga.

On Amiga, you put in a floppy disk, and a little window would appear. You then clicked an icon and the game would start. Or rather, a bunch of wobbly text proclaiming "ZYBERX CREW" would appear, and then the game would start.

On PC, we had to use commands to find our c:\games directly then dir to see what games we had installed on our 40MB (sic) hard drive, then cd\ wc to get into the Wing Commander directory, then dir /w to remind ourselves what the exe was called, then type wc to start the game.

No expanded memory detected, the command line would say. Limited music and FX will play.

So then we had to quit the game and go and write an autoexec.bat to run himem.sys and emm386.exe with noems, and also don't forget to make DOS high and UMB, and LH as much of everything else like the mouse or whatever, as possible.

Expanded memory detected! Full music and FX will play!

THREE BODY SOLUTION

So much better. See, this was gaming in 1990. Forcing your PC to do things the way YOU want it to do them. Now of course, our machines rarely crash, and if they do crash, it's because you haven't got desk fan blowing into your open case at quite the right angle... seriously dude, invest in a few cans of compressed air and blast the dust out of the poor thing, yeah?

The 386 was the CPU that finally made IBM's promise of "open architecture" a true reality, and it laid the groundwork for the great explosion of the home PC in about 1994.

So the 386 was, in many ways, the first PC a person would buy JUST because they liked playing games. For people who wanted to merely process words, make music, draw, wrangle spreadsheets... there was the Macintosh. For us though, the universe was just about to explode.

DID YOU EVER SEE A NEW 386?

One of the oddest things about my experience of the 386 is that I never saw a new one. Every 386-based PC I used or saw was hand-me-down, or a second-hand purchase, or as the 1990s depened, a found-it-on-the-side-of-the-road rescue job. The first PC my family ever bought was a 486SX. In 1993, most of the supergeeks at school had a PC at home... but they were all either new 486s, or second-hand 386s than had come from... somewhere. Oh, and there was one guy who had a Tandy.

That was weird.

INVENTORY

THE BEST BUILD FOR EVERY BUDGET

CONTROLLERS

Sometimes you gotta go mouse + keyboardless

Xbox One Controller

$69 *microsoft.com/en-au/*

Plug and play meets comfort. Every PC needs a controller and this is the best

Steam Controller

$89.95 *store.steampowered.com*

There's a bit of a learning curve, but it's great for couch gaming

MODEM ROUTERS

For all rational budgets

BUDGET

Synology RT1900RT

$169 *synology.com*

Good performance and delightfully easy to set up and manage

Synology Router RT2600ac

$328 *synology.com*

Perfect for all but the biggest families, has unusually strong transmission strength

PREMIUM

Asus ROG Rapture GT-AC5300 Gaming Router

$695 *asus.com.au*

Super fast and future proof, this is a gaming router that takes no prisoners and offers no compromise.

LAPTOPS

Gaming on the go

BUDGET

Dell G3 15

$1,599 *www.dell.com*

8th-gen CPU and a reasonable GTX 1050 is a bargain basic gamer

PREMIUM

NEW!

MSI GS75 Stealth 8SG

$4,799 *msi.com*

Now boasting RTX power!

MINI

For lounge room gaming and streaming

CPU + COOLING

Intel Core i5 7500 w/ stock cooler

$235

intel.com

MOBO

Asrock Z270M-ITX/AC Motherboard

$185

asrock.com.au

GPU

Asus DUAL-RX480-4G

$338

asus.com.au

MEMORY

16GB DDR4 Corsair Vengeance LPX

$249

corsair.com/en-au

STORAGE

Samsung SSD M.2 2280 NVMe 250G 960 EVO + 2TB HDD (any)

$169 + $50 *samsung.com/au*

CASE

Fractal Design Define S Nano

$115

fractal-design.com

PSU

SilverStone SFX Gold 500W SX500-LG

$110

Silverstone.com

SOUND

Your sound system

What you paid for it

DISPLAY

Your TV

What you paid for it

KEYBOARD

Roccat Sova

$199

www.roccat.org

MOUSE

Roccat Kone EMP

$99

www.roccat.org

TOTAL: **$1,749**

BUDGET

The perfect entry-level gaming PC

CPU + COOLING

AMD Ryzen 5 2600 + Wraith cooler

$235

amd.com

MOBO

Gigabyte B450 Aorus Pro Wifi

$229

gigabyte.com.au

GPU

MSI RX 580 Gaming 8GB

$399

msi.com

MEMORY

G.Skill Ripjaws 4 DDR4 2400MHz 16GB Kit 2x 8GB

$279 *gskill.com*

STORAGE

Sandisk SSD Plus 240GB

$85 *www.sandisk.com.au*

CASE

Corsair Carbide SPEC-02 Mid Tower Gaming Case

$80 *corsair.com/en-au*

PSU

SilverStone Strider Essential 500W ST50F-ESB **$55**

silverstone.com

SOUND

Cougar Phontum

$69

cougargaming.com

DISPLAY

AOC Q3279VWFD8 75Hz Freesync 32in IPS

$299

au.aoc.com

KEYBOARD

Tesoro Tizona G2N

$49

tesorotec.com

MOUSE

Cooler Master MM530

$59

coolermaster.com

TOTAL: **$1,829**

While there've been no changes to our PC builds this month, we do have a shiny new contender in the performance laptop space. RTX-powered mobile gaming machines have been dropping for a couple of months now, but we're quite happy to say we've found the best of the bunch - MSI's slim GS75 Stealth 8SG, which we review this issue on page 77.

PERFORMANCE

Most bells and whistles, without breaking the bank

CPU + COOLING
Intel Core i7 8700K with Noctua NH-D15 CPU Cooler
$529 + $115 *intel.com*

MOBO
Asrock Z370 Taichi
$284
asrock.com.au

GPU
MSI GeForce RTX 2070 Gaming Z 8G
$1069
au.msi.com

MEMORY
G.Skill RIPJAWS 4 32GB KIT 4X8GB
$599
gskill.com

STORAGE
2TB HDD (any) + SAMSUNG 500GB M.2 NVMe SSD 970 EVO PLUS
$199 + $50
samsung.com/au

CASE
Fractal Define R6
$209
fractal-design.com

PSU
Be Quiet! Dark Power Pro 11 850W Power Supply
$279
bequiet.com

SOUND
Sennheiser PC 373D
$329
en-au.sennheiser.com

DISPLAY
Asus ROG Strix XG32VQ
$859
www.asus.com/au

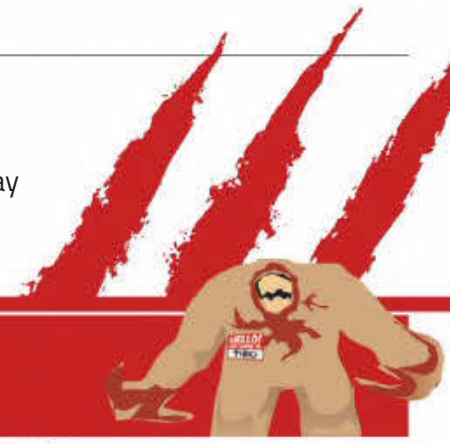
KEYBOARD
Cooler Master MK750
$189
www.coolermaster.com

MOUSE
Roccat Kone Aimo
$99
www.roccat.org

TOTAL: **$4,809**

THE BEAST

When overkill is barely enough...



CPU + COOLING
AMD Threadripper 2 2990WX + Corsair H105
$2,699 + $145
amd.com

MOBO
Asus ROG Zenith Extreme
$559
asus.com.au

VIDEO
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti
$1,899
nvidia.com/en-au

MEMORY
4x8GB G.Skill Trident Z RGB quad-channel 3466MHz DDR4
$745
gskill.com

STORAGE
Samsung 960 Pro 2TB + Seagate Barracuda Pro 10TB
$1,589 + $599
samsung.com/au

CASE
Thermaltake Level 20 GT
$369
thermaltake.com.au

PSU
Corsair RM1000i Special Edition
$279
corsair.com/en-au

SOUND
Astro A50
$399
www.astrogaming.com

DISPLAY
Alienware AW3418DW
$2,099
alienware.com

KEYBOARD
Corsair K95 Platinum RGB
$249
corsair.com/en-au/

MOUSE
Corsair M65 RGB Elite
$85
rcorsair.com/en-au/

TOTAL: **$11,715**

Tri-band data rate of of 5334 Mbps
Ultra-fast 802.11ac Wi-Fi router
Smooth 4K/UHD video playback

2.4 GHz 1000 Mbps
5 GHz-1 2167 Mbps
5 GHz-2 2167 Mbps

Exclusive Built-In Game Accelerator

HOTWARE 276
with Terrence Jarrad

01

02

03

04

05

Sega Genesis Mini
Price: $120 ▪ Distributor: Sega
gensismini.sega.com

It had to happen, right? All these other minis. Gotta get on that bandwagon before someone ruins consumer goodwill. What? No! Shhh! We don't talk about the Sony one!
POWERED UP: A 'first party' product, unlike previous Sega mini consoles which were built by AtGames and generally fairly poorly received. Includes 40 games with expected titles like Sonic and Altered Beast, but also less common games like Castlevania and ToeJam & Earl. Comes with two wired, three-button controllers.
PLAYED OUT: Some people pronounce SEGA like "say-gah". Wild huh?

HTC 5G Hub
Price: $TBA ▪ Distributor: HTC
www.htc.com

Say hello to this Pie-powered Android tablet that sits on a desk or bench somewhere and gives your home or business internet through a 5G hotspot.
POWERED UP: 5inch 720x1280 display. Supports up to 20 connected devices. Voice controls. 7660mAh battery. VPN for those more business-oriented.
PLAYED OUT: Our 5G future isn't quite here in Australia.

Hololens 2
Price: $5,000 ▪ Distributor: Microsoft
www.microsoft.com

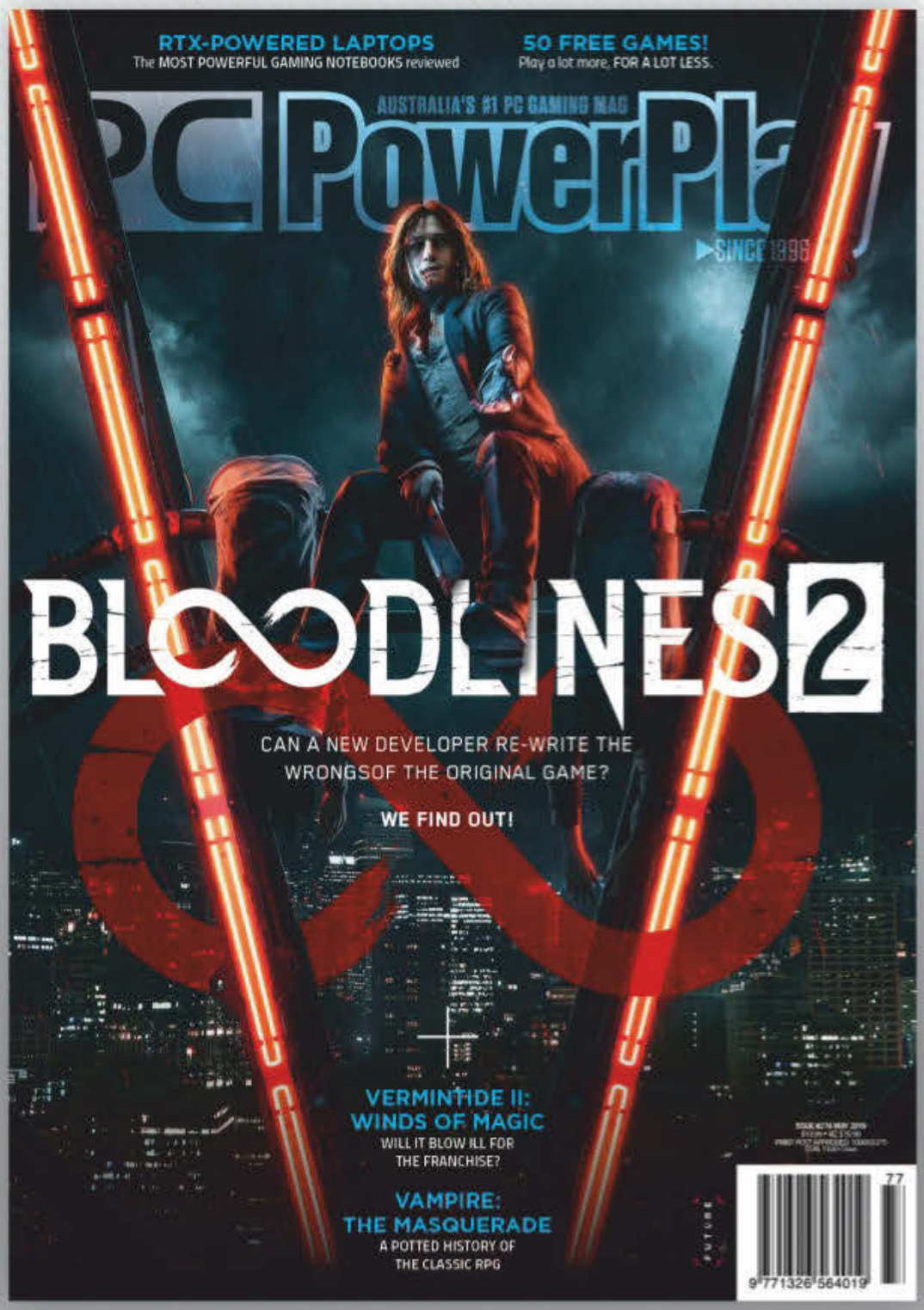
Speaking of our future, Microsoft's vision for how we do just about everything, from manufacturing to medicine, is one of augmented reality, thanks to the Hololens 2 headset.
POWERED UP: While we like to think about what augmented/mixed reality headsets could do for gaming, current abilities include remote assistance for complex technical issues, or assisting minimally-invasive surgical procedures.
PLAYED OUT: Priced out of range for most, we aren't likely to see hobbyist development on this platform for quite some time.

Kiwano KO1+
Price: $1,500 ▪ Distributor: Kiwano
www.kiwano.co

A "self balancing electric scooter" is how Kiwano describes this vehicle, probably because "unicycle offroad Segway" doesn't sound anywhere near as good.
POWERED UP: This thing charges in two hours, has a top speed around 19km/h, and about 19km range.
PLAYED OUT: So many things, but why did it need to be "fire proof"? Did Kiwano envision this being used in Hollywood movies, with cool guys scooting away from explosions without looking back? Are the batteries so volatile they catch alight? Oh, wait, it says right there: "safety shield prevents explosion" um... maybe give this one a miss.

CXC Motion Pro II
Price: $73,000+ ▪ Distributor: CXC Simulations
www.cxcsimulations.com

Are you a racing sim fanatic? Are you still using that PVC pipe "simulator" you built badly with bits from Bunnings? Do you have two thirds of 100-large burning a hole in your back pocket? If you answered yes to all of these questions then wow do we have something cool for you!
POWERED UP: Built and tested with pro racers for over two years, this is going to be the closest thing to real racing most of us would get, and it's highly customisable: you can choose the standard model with a single screen and wheel, or grab the Pro with panoramic display, Oculus integration, and multiple wheel configurations (for a paltry 50k extra).
PLAYED OUT: You could buy an ACTUAL FAST CAR for this money. PC


RTX-POWERED LAPTOPS
The MOST POWERFUL GAMING NOTEBOOKS reviewed
50 FREE GAMES!
Play a lot more, FOR A LOT LESS.
AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG
PC PowerPlay
SINCE 1996
BLOODLINES 2
CAN A NEW DEVELOPER RE-WRITE THE WRONGSOF THE ORIGINAL GAME?
WE FIND OUT!
VERMINTIDE II: WINDS OF MAGIC
WILL IT BLOW ILL FOR THE FRANCHISE?
VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE
A POTTED HISTORY OF THE CLASSIC RPG
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THE CRYING GAMES

Back in 2004, an unknown German developer exploded onto the gaming scene with a 3D engine that could finally challenge Epic and ID. The result was Far Cry, a game that spawned two very different, yet inextricably linked, franchises. A family, if you like, with two branches, one of which went on to conquer the gaming world, and another which ended not with a bang, but a whimper.

FAR CRY SERIES / CRYSIS SERIES

DEVELOPERS UBISOFT MONTREAL / CRYTEK
PERSONALITIES CEVAT YERLI, ANVI YERLI, FARUK YERLI, TURKO-GERMAN GAME DEVELOPERS GENERALLY, UBISOFT AS A GESTALT
RELEASED FAR CRY: 2004-2018 / CRYSIS: 2007-2013
NUTSHELL OPEN WORLD SHOOTERS THAT INITIALLY PUSHED HARDWARE TO THE LIMIT AND SHOWED US WHAT A TRUE "NEXT GENERATION" PC GAME COULD BE, BUT WERE PROGRESSIVELY DUMBED-DOWN TO MAKE BIGGER BUCKS FROM THE CONSOLE MARKETS.

By the early 2000s, PCs had finally reached a point where gamers could expect truly huge worlds in their games. Morrowind came out in 2002. So did Grand Theft Auto III. World of Warcraft was 2004.

But these games had a very particular graphical limitation: their engines could only really render an area close around the player. The worlds were perpetually shrouded in fog. There was no "far green country under a swift sunrise" as some old wizard might have said. GTA3 actually did a pretty good job of things by limiting the amount of places the player could even see that far, but when you hit the water and stole a police boat out by the pier on Staunton Island, the hills in the far distance were little more than grey triangles.

Far Cry not only rendered amazing detail at far distances (get it now?), it had dynamic level-of-detail capabilities that allowed the player to use binoculars or the scope on a sniper rifle to clear out an enemy encampment from the next hill.

That might not sound particularly amazing in 2019, but in 2004 it was a revelation. The euphoria of which was blunted somewhat by the subsequent revelation that Far Cry wasn't that good a game.

To be fair to Crytek, Far Cry was born from a tech demo they'd made called X-Isle: Dinosaur Island, and (though they've never confirmed this) the idea seemed to be that Crytek and its CryEngine would be, much like Epic was for some years, first and foremost a middleware developer.

And indeed the company has gone on to be just that. After Far Cry, CryEngines 2, 3, 4, CryEngine (sic), and CryEngine V (also sic) have been licensed to create games you've heard of like Prey, and a lot of games you probably haven't heard of like Winning Putt, Robinson: The Journey, and a bunch of titles whose websites don't even work.

But back in 2004, or I suppose a year or so earlier, Ubisoft took one look at that X-Isle demo and said "Yes please! Can you make, like, a whole game from this?"

And the team at Crytek looked at each other and shrugged. Sure they could make a whole game from their tech demo. What do gamers like? Hot chicks who turn out to be CIA agents, a badass dude "hiding" in the jungle while wearing a bright-red Hawaiian shirt, and abandoning the whole stealth-optional mercenary hunting framework for blasting away at mutant gorillas towards the end of the game. Right?

Perhaps most oddly, the game's weapons were intricately rendered (by 2004 standards) with full details like iron sights, but the actual game didn't let you hold the weapon up in a way to let you use those iron sights. That was added later by modders.

But come on. So what if Far Cry wasn't the greatest open world shooter ever? It showed amazing promise, and at the time we couldn't wait to see what Ubisoft and Crytek would do next.

CHICKEN TO THE FACE

And so of course the two companies immediately parted ways. Crytek went off to crunch literally a million lines of code into Crysis, and Ubisoft was left with a licensed version of the original engine - now called Dunia - and the Far Cry IP.

Now the world had two "Far Cry engine" developers, in direct competition, and we waited to see what would happen with bated breath (actually, TBH at the time I didn't even realise this had happened, I left all the Far Cry super-fanboy-ism to David Wildgoose).

First out of the gate was Crytek's Crysis. The name was a compromise because they didn't own Far Cry anymore, but the game, which dropped in late 2007, was... something else. The CryEngine 2 on which it ran was compiled from literally a million lines of code, and had texture data measured in the gigabytes. All perfectly normal... for a game released ten years later.

Hilariously, Crysis suffered from almost exactly the same problems as Far Cry: the first two thirds of the game were an amazing open FPS, where you could approach each target from any of a dozen different ways. This was mostly thanks to the player's Nanosuit, which had "modes" like stealth, power-up, high jump etc that could be selected with a hotkey and flick of the mouse.

When we got the review code in the PCPP offices, then-art-director Glen Downey played the opening level, "Contact", about ten times, just seeing all the different ways he could take down the soldiers camping on the beach. Yes,

THE REAL WINNERS?

From this article, you might think Crytek's decision to dump Ubisoft and go it alone (ie with EA, THQ, and various others), wasn't exactly genius. But even as it was releasing underwhelming Crysis sequels (and Ryse: Son of Rome - remember that one?), Crytek was doing deals and licensing its engine. Eventually, they scored the big one: Amazon picked up CryEngine in 2015 as the core of its Lumberyard cross-platform general purpose 3D engine. It's "free" to you, but it integrates with Amazon Web Services, and you can bet your last obsolete German mark that Crytek, as a result of this deal, is now set for life.

chickens and crabs were eventually hurled.

And yet the back third of the game was rubbish. Aliens, corridor shooting, no options or freedom, terrible frame-rates due to object complexity, and a by-the-numbers big boss fight right at the end. Oh well, at least the graphics were still awesome.

IT BEGAN IN AFRICA-CA-CA-CA...

Meanwhile, obviously, Ubisoft couldn't possibly create a game even as good as Far Cry - let alone Crysis - without the coding genius of Cevat Yerli and his brothers(?), and their Teutonic work ethic.

Which is why in 2008, Far Cry 2 turned out to be... um, kind of brilliant?

It was set in Africa, the map was huge, and the world did real stuff. Set fire to a tree and it would burn into a blackened skeleton, while the fire spread through the dry grass around it. Firing a rocket launcher with a bunch of dry grass behind you would set YOU on fire. Enemy soldiers would apply first aid to their injured comrades, or try to carry them off the battlefield. You could shoot people through flimsy corrugated iron shacks. You could shoot branches off trees.

Far Cry 2 was in many ways as much of a tech demo as Far Cry. The team at Ubisoft Montreal almost seemed to take Crysis as a challenge. Okay sure, maybe their game didn't LOOK as amazing, but they made it do way more stuff.

And the story was like almost nothing we've seen since. You're sent in to a Central African nation with a simple mission: kill the terrorist known as the Jackal. What follows is basically a potboiler espionage novel (with brains) that follows the collapse of a country from "unrest" into "civil war" and eventually "pure anarchy".

It seems hard to imagine that Far Cry 2 could get made today. The game was more ARMA than Call of Duty. You had to drive around a lot. The interface was in the world - to examine a map, you literally pull a map out of your pocket.

Shot? Dig a knife into the would to extract the bullet. Bit by a snake? Uh... dig a knife into the wound to extract the bullet. Need to heal fall damage? Dig a knife into... well you get the point. It wasn't perfect.

But Far Cry 2 was amazing and we couldn't wait to see what Far Cry 3 would bring.

Oh.

WELCOME TO THE MAINSTREAM

So what happened of course, to both the Far Cry and Crysis franchises, was console sales. Consoles in the early 2010s didn't have the power to procedurally burn trees that you could also shoot branches off. And console players — no disrespect — didn't want a "thinking man's shooter". For the growing console user base, a shooter was something to do at the end of the day, to unwind after a crushing ten hours in corporate whatever. BLAM BLAM BLAM. Don't ask them to think about it, to plan a stealthy approach, to modify weapons, or - least of all - tolerate realistic gun jamming like in Far Cry 2.

The accusation "dumbed down for console" is made with fairly reckless abandon but it really does stick to Far Cries 3, 4, and 5 and Cryses 2 and 3.

Probably, Far Cry did the better job of it. Far Cry 3 is not as smart or complex as Far Cry 2, but it's still a fairly sophisticated open world shooter. Far Cry 4 has some interesting story beats, and both it and Far Cry 5 have wink-to-the-open-world-superfans secret endings you get right at the beginning by doing... nothing. Seriously, if you just stand there for a few minutes, the game ends.

Crytek approached its two final Crysis games with a truly bizarre mission statement: they would leave behind the "literal jungle" setting of Far Cry and Crysis, and instead focus on the super-original "concrete jungle" setting of... bloody Manhattan again.

And in Crysis 3, because aliens, New York had also become sort of half a literal jungle, too.

The last two Crysis games again did significant things for the advancement of FPS engine tech. They run fast and look good, and are much less punishing than the original.

But they aren't great games.

YOU CAN LEAD A GAMER TO CRYSIS...

Maybe Crytek was never that good at actual game design. But with Far Cry 2 in its back catalogue, Ubisoft has no similar excuse.

ANTHONY FORDHAM PC

Crysis was the game that helped benchmark whole generations of PC hardware.

ENDURING LEGACY

For something like a decade, the phrase "but can it run Crysis?" was the standard gag response to anyone boasting about the power of their PC. Crysis became PC's answer to the Mac's "sure those are good graphics, but did you ever play Myst?" except, you know, Crysis actually had good realtime graphics.

Cevat Yerli at a Gamescom event a few years back.

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AUGUST 2019

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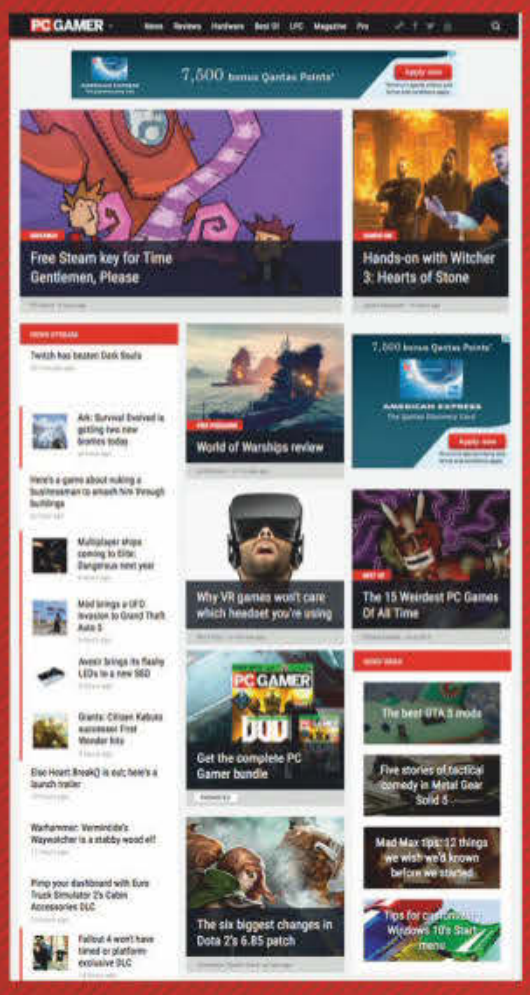
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